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EXCLUSIVE

MARSHAWN LYNCH BRINGS BEAST MODE TO CALL OF DUTY

THE
eSPORTS
ISSUE

PLUS

37

MILLION PEOPLE REVERE
GAMING PHENOM PEWDIEPIE
BY WAYNE DREHS

32

MILLION WATCH FAKER
RULE LEAGUE OF LEGENDS
BY MINA KIMES

89

MILLION RATE AS
eSPORTS FANATICS

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INSIDE

10 THE NUMBERS

What makes some golfers choke and others succeed. *By Peter Keating*

108 THE TRUTH

Is Montreal ready to forget about the Expos and start over? *By Howard Bryant*

PLAYBOOK

13 NBA DRAFT

Should the Wolves draft (and keep) Karl-Anthony Towns?

18 MOCK DRAFT

Chad Ford predicts your team's June 25 pick.

20 SCOUTTAKE

A scout, analysts and Jahlil Okafor dissect ... Okafor.

24 U.S. OPEN

Jordan Spieth's caddie is a ringer at Chambers Bay.

26 SOCCER

Brazilian star Marta's goal: Return to Sweden a champ.

30 FANDOM

Yankees fan Richard Albero's 1,200-mile walk home.

DON'T MISS

38 AFTER THE SEVEN SUMMITS

They summited the tallest peak on each continent. Now a group of Nepali women must rebuild their home after two earthquakes. *By Alyssa Roenigk*

eSPORTS

50 THE eSPORTS ISSUE

Up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, B, A.

52 THE UNKILLABLE DEMON KING

Gaming's first real global superstar is a teenager named Faker. *By Mina Kimes*

68 RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

The numbers don't lie: The economics of eSports prove they are here to stay. *By Ben Casselman*

70 THE WHOLE GAME IS BEAST MODE

Marshawn Lynch enlists in Call of Duty: Black Ops III. *By Sam Alipour*

78 THE LEGENDARY ADVENTURES OF A FEARLESS GIRL GAMER

So many games, so little time for trolls. *By Latoya Peterson*

80 IN THE HOUSE OF HEROES

So close you can hear the buttons mashing at Major League Gaming's Dota 2 tourney. *By Hallie Grossman*

88 THE MAN WHO GAMED THE WORLD

YouTube king PewDiePie convinced the world it's OK to watch. *By Wayne Drehs*



JIM BOWDEN'S PICKS

TOP 5 PITCHING TRADE TARGETS

COLE HAMELS PHILLIES

Hamels (above), signed to a long-term deal, is the most valuable pitcher on the market because the acquiring club will control him through 2019 at market value. The Phillies won't unload him if they don't get a topflight package, but given Hamels' October success, a team will pony up by the July 31 trade deadline.

BEST FIT Dodgers

SCOTT KAZMIR A's

A free-agent-to-be, Kazmir had an impressive 8.8 K/9 rate through May, and opponents were hitting just .220 against him. The A's won't be able to sign him long-term, so they will deal him and should receive plenty in return. The Dodgers and Cardinals are the favorites, given their strong farm systems.

BEST FIT Cards, Dodgers

MATT GARZA BREWERS

The Brewers need to rebuild, retool and sell off their best assets. Garza's competitiveness would help a contending team, and clubs like the Astros and Blue Jays could stand to upgrade the middle of their starting rotations. But Garza must start pitching better (5.52 ERA) to have decent trade value.

BEST FIT Blue Jays

KYLE LOHSE BREWERS

Lohse's ERA (6.50 through May) is up nearly three runs from last season, hurting his stock. The Brewers are better off waiting until the end of July for his sinker and effectiveness (54 wins over his previous four seasons) to return. If that happens, he'd be a solid back-of-the-rotation starter for a contender.

BEST FIT Giants

AARON HARANG PHILLIES

Unlike Lohse's, Harang's stock will never be higher than it is now; entering June, the impending free agent had a 2.02 ERA. The Phillies should trade him soon for a hot prospect and call it a season. Excluding Hamels and Harang, the Phillies' rotation had a 6.27 ERA and just six wins in 30 starts through May.

BEST FIT Astros



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THIS MONTH AT INSIDER

NBA Kevin Pelton has Roster Reloads for the NBA Finals teams, showing what the Cavaliers and Warriors will have to do to pursue a title next season.

MLB With the All-Star Game coming July 14, Buster Olney is all over the most surprising first-half storylines.

NFL DRAFT It's never too early to talk draft: Mel Kiper goes position by position and breaks down the draft targets to watch this fall.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL Jeff Goodman and Jeff Borzello preview the summer recruiting season with the prime targets for the top 50 teams.

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Much like Tim Duncan on this 1999 cover, eSports have taken off. Unlike the Big Fundamental, the industry still has legs. espnmag.com/covers

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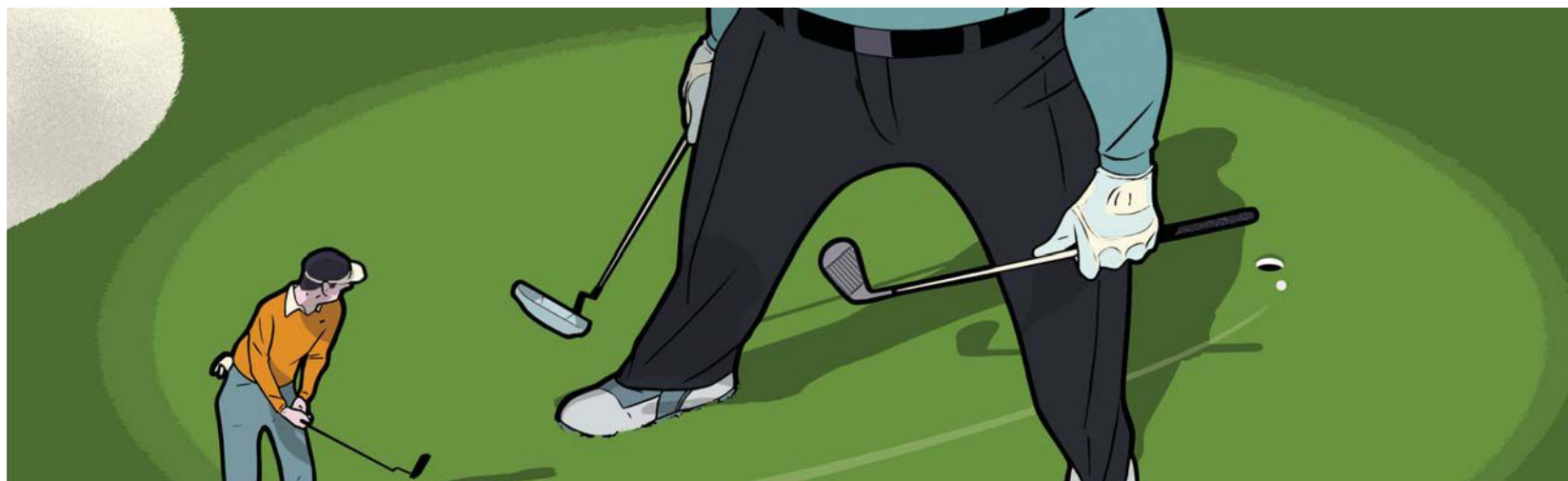
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[NOONAN... NOONAN!] *Why do golfers sometimes step up under pressure and other times crack? A closer listen to the voices inside their heads reveals the answer.*

[F]or most of us, dancing around the house to a favorite song is fun, but performing a routine to the same song at a competition would be traumatic. Facing opponents, judged by experts, in front of an audience—I'm surprised that more of the amateurs on *Dancing With the Stars* don't fall on their faces. Of course, professional athletes are supposed to be different. They live for competition, battle the world's best, become inured to huge crowds. With occasional exceptions, such as players who come down with the yips, they keep their focus.

Subconsciously, however, we are all human. And research shows that social pressures affect pro athletes too—in often unexpected ways, as we are sure to see at the U.S. Open at Chambers Bay starting June 18.

The basic way to win at anything is to keep getting better at it. But when people gauge performance, they often rely on measures of social comparison, not objective levels of achievement: We don't just want to run a four-minute mile, we want to beat everyone else. One factor that drives us is what psychologists call proximity to a standard. When we are close to a goal, to winning that figurative race, we tend to become more competitive. In a 2009 study, for example, researchers told participants in a winter survival test that they ranked either 4th, 51st or 96th among 100 participants, then let them interact with individuals who ranked either 5th, 52nd or 97th. Result: Even though the survival task was nominally man against nature, the subjects who ranked high in the test began to compete against one another too, mano a mano, and exchange fewer survival tips.

In pro golf, an athlete's proximate standard is literally right next to him: The later rounds of PGA tournaments typically pair golfers who are close to each other on the leaderboard. And it turns out that an outstanding performance by one golfer inspires those nearby to compete harder and perform better. In a paper presented at the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference in February, Deepak Dhayanithy and Varsha Singh studied 106,370 putts from the third and fourth rounds of 29 PGA

events in 2013, controlling for factors like distance to holes and how many times golfers previously played on each green. They found that a whopping 86 percent of golfers convert more birdie putts at a higher rate when their partner is also putting for birdie.

Now, before we go much further, it's also true that golf has witnessed one of the rare exceptions to the rules of social pressures: Tiger Woods at his peak. From 1998 to 2001, golfers playing with Woods shot an average of 0.462 strokes worse per round than their estimated skill level, according to a 2008 study by Robert Connolly and Richard Rendleman. Indeed, until Tiger's hiatus from golf in 2010, only one player grouped with Woods in the first two rounds of the Masters—Mike Weir in 2001—finished the event below par, according to reporter Tim Bella. For a while, he was so dominant and so great at large-scale events that he psyched his fellow pros out rather than up.

Another social pressure, called the N-effect, influences golfers in ways that Woods alone cannot. In the N-effect, your competitiveness increases as the number of participants in a playing field decreases. Research has found, for example, that people are more likely to blow their budgets at auctions when bidding against a few rivals rather than many. But there's a wrinkle to the N-effect: If you're pushed by other contestants to compete harder, you'll generally do better at tasks that are easy, or that you're good at, but worse at complicated or unfamiliar jobs. And Dhayanithy and Singh found that the N-effect applies to the PGA too. Increasing the size of tournament fields leads golfers, on average, to putt worse for birdie (which is difficult) but has no significant effect on their putting for par (which is easy). So if you want your favorite golfer to win the U.S. Open, you should root for him to birdie early and for his playing partners over the weekend to succeed, not fail.

The deeper lesson: Golf, like any great social drama, requires its characters to battle not only their psyches and external terrain but also the hidden pressures of competition itself.

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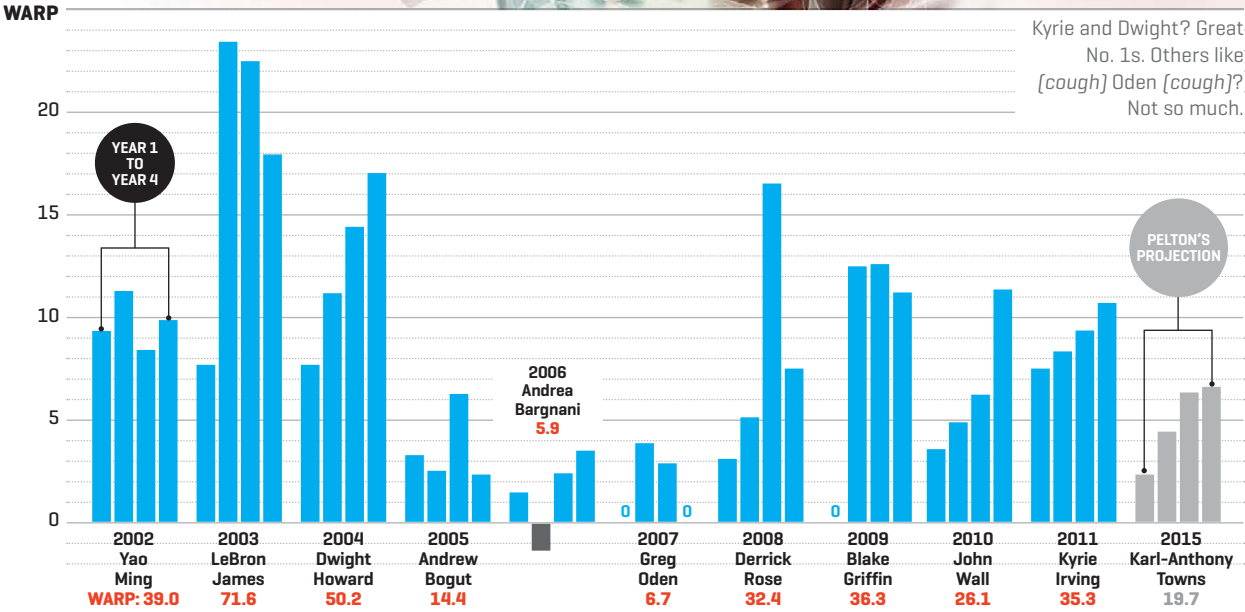
TALK OF THE TOWNS

WHY SHOULD MINNESOTA TAKE KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS WITH THE NO. 1 PICK? BECAUSE HE'LL BE WORTH BLAKE GRIFFIN, J.J. REDICK AND MATT BARNES ... *COMBINED!* By Jordan Brenner

Last year the Cavaliers became the third NBA team to trade the top pick before he played a game, shipping Andrew Wiggins to the Timberwolves as part of a package for Kevin Love. A year later, after winning 16 games, the Wolves own the top pick. The consensus is that they'll take Karl-Anthony Towns on June 25. That raises the question: Should they flip the script? One Eastern Conference exec says no way, noting that Towns "has the chance to be a top-10 player." But given the number of teams that tanked [er ... rebuilt] to try to land the pick, the Wolves might be wise to explore their options. As is our wont, we turn to the numbers for an answer.

BY OUR WARPED WAY OF THINKING ...

So what's the No. 1 pick worth anyway? That's long been a guessing game. For every LeBron James, there is, of course, an equal and opposite Andrea Bargnani. So we asked ESPN Insider Kevin Pelton to determine how many wins above replacement player [WARP] the average No. 1 pick produces in each of his first four seasons (see right). The answer: an average of 20.2 WARP over the course of an NBA rookie contract, with an average of 2.0 in the first season and 6.9 in the fourth and final year. "When you look at the history of the league," says that Eastern exec, "you see the majority of the star players come out of the top four or five picks in the draft."



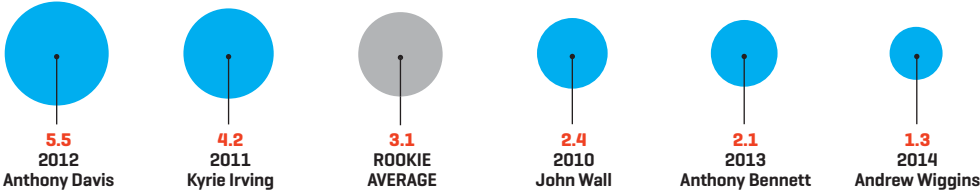
... HE IS MINNESOTA'S KIND OF TOWNS

But is Towns the right fit for the Wolves? While he's the presumed No. 1 pick, topping Chad Ford's Big Board and Pelton's consensus rating, the stats offer notes of caution. According to Pelton (see below), Towns, with a projected first-season WARP of 2.3, isn't nearly the prospect that Anthony Davis and Kyrie Irving were—but is tops in the current draft: Guard D'Angelo Russell and big man Kristaps Porzingis project just below with 2.0 and 1.9, respectively. Plus, Towns solves Minnesota's biggest need: rim protection. Last season the Wolves ranked last in the NBA in rim D, allowing foes to shoot 57.9 percent. Towns, with an 11.7 percent block rate, would send a goodly number of those shots into the third row.

POTENTIAL TOP PICKS

	Consensus rating	Ford rank
Karl-Anthony Towns Kentucky	4.0	1
D'Angelo Russell Ohio State	3.7	3
Kristaps Porzingis Latvia	3.4	5
Emmanuel Mudiay China	3.1	4
Jahlil Okafor Duke	3.0	2

FIRST-SEASON WARP PROJECTIONS FOR PAST NO. 1 PICKS





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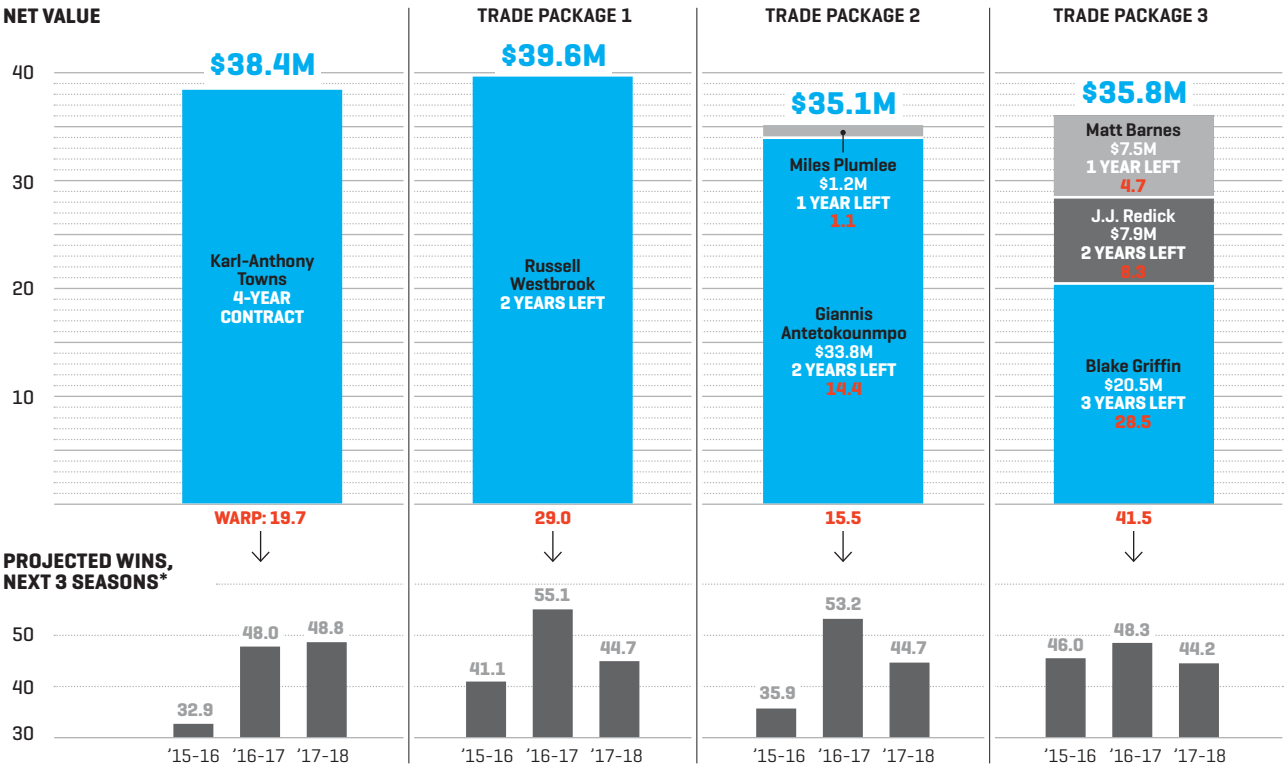
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He might not deliver on par with Westbrook or Griffin, but oh, the bang for Towns' buck!

BUT CAN ANYONE MAKE THE WOLVES AN OFFER THEY CAN'T REFUSE?

The Timberwolves need help, and trading the pick could yield instant benefits. If so, they might want to rely on something more, uh, *accurate* than Flip Saunders' judgment—like numbers! To that end, we turn to Pelton's new money-focused metric called net value, in which he converts a player's WARP to a dollar-figure value, then subtracts his actual salary. So would trading Towns for, say, Russell Westbrook be a good idea? Well, Towns' net value over four years [\$64.1M WARP value – \$25.7M salary = \$38.4M] is nearly equal to Westbrook's over the two years left on his contract [\$74.1M – \$34.5M = \$39.6M]. But even that [unlikely] swap would turn the Wolves into only a 41-win team next season, according to Pelton's roster projections, and leave the Wolves worse off in the long run. What about the Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo? Teaming the Greek Freak with Andrew Wiggins is tantalizing, but should the Wolves fail to re-sign him for 2017-18, they'd project to have just 45 W's. How about a three-for-one with the Clippers' Blake Griffin, J.J. Redick and Matt Barnes? While that would have the biggest impact on the Wolves next season (46 W's), by '17-18 they'd win just 44 games. The Towns-led Wolves? Close to 50. These are just hypotheticals, but all point to the same conclusion: The Wolves should pick Towns and raise him as one of their own.



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Projecting future performance is an inexact science. Just look at the presumed top four picks in the draft and where they ranked at this time last year on ESPN's high school recruiting index.

- CHAD FORD'S BIG BOARD RANK

NO. 1

Karl-Anthony Towns
No. 9 ESPN 100 ranking
- NO. 2

Jahlil Okafor
No. 1 ESPN 100 ranking
- NO. 3

D'Angelo Russell
No. 13 ESPN 100 ranking
- NO. 4

Emmanuel Mudiay
No. 5 ESPN 100 ranking

*ACCORDING TO KEVIN PELTON'S ROSTER PROJECTIONS

DOES HE HAVE THE
ATHLETICISM TO SUCCEED
AT THE

PRO
LEVEL?

IS HE

A WILLING
DEFENDER?

WILL
HE BE ABLE
TO DEFEND
CONSISTENTLY?

CAN HE
REBOUND
AGAINST
BIGGER COMPETITION?

DOES
HE HAVE THE
LATERAL
AGILITY
TO COVER THE
PICK &
ROLL?

WILL HE
BE ABLE
TO IMPROVE HIS
FREE THROW
SHOOTING
?

FRANK KAMINSKY
Power forward / Center

JAHLIL OKAFOR
Center

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WHAT MATTERS MOST IS HOW YOU DEFY THE DOUBT.



MOCK IT UP

Drafting a foundation. Drafting for need. Drafting a final piece. The NBA draft serves many purposes. So what will your team do come June 25? ESPN NBA Insider Chad Ford reveals all.

Three men and a round, orange ball: Likely lottery picks Winslow, Cauley-Stein and Russell.

NO. 1—TIMBERWOLVES

KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS 6-11 | 250 | F/C | Kentucky | Age 19
Towns' workout in LA—draining 3 after 3—was amazing. He has no glaring weakness, and with his elite potential on defense, he's a better fit in Minnesota than Jahlil Okafor.

NO. 2—LAKERS

JAHLIL OKAFOR 6-11 | 270 | C | Duke | Age 19
The Lakers are torn between Okafor, D'Angelo Russell and Emmanuel Mudiay, but their traditional front office likes dominant bigs who rule the paint. Nod to Okafor.

NO. 3—76ERS

D'ANGELO RUSSELL 6-5 | 193 | G | Ohio State | Age 19
Philly needs a PG and a shooter, and Russell is elite at both (115.7 ORtg, 41.1 3PT%). Landing him here would be a big boon to GM Sam Hinkie's rebuilding effort.

NO. 4—KNICKS

EMMANUEL MUDIAY 6-5 | 190 | PG | China | Age 19
Mudiay is New York's obvious choice. He's a long (6-foot-8½ wingspan) true PG who defends and breaks down opposing defenses with ease. And he fills a major need.

NO. 5—MAGIC

KRISTAPS PORZINGIS 7-0 | 220 | PF | Latvia | Age 19
Orlando has a nice core in Elfrid Payton, Victor Oladipo and Aaron Gordon but is lacking a frontcourt star. Porzingis, with his myriad skills, could develop into one.

NO. 6—KINGS

WILLIE CAULEY-STEIN 7-0 | 242 | C | Kentucky | Age 21
Sacramento had the third-fewest blocks and the fourth-worst D in the NBA last season. Cauley-Stein (2.2 career bpg) is the best overall defender in his class. 'Nuff said.

NO. 7—NUGGETS

JUSTISE WINSLOW 6-6 | 222 | G/F | Duke | Age 19
Denver is reshuffling its deck, and Winslow is the perfect player to anchor a rebuild. He's a high-energy, defense-first, high-character kid, so this pick is a good fit for both sides.

NO. 8—PISTONS

MARIO HEZONJA 6-8 | 213 | G/F | Croatia | Age 20
Detroit has a major hole at SF, and at No. 8, Hezonja is a steal. His size and shooting—38 percent from 3—will allow him to contribute immediately.

NO. 9—HORNETS

DEVIN BOOKER 6-6 | 206 | SG | Kentucky | Age 18
Obvious fit here: Charlotte ranked dead last with a 31.8 3PT% in 2014-15. Booker, the youngest player in the draft, shot 41.1 percent from 3 last season.

NO. 10—HEAT

STANLEY JOHNSON 6-7 | 242 | SF | Arizona | Age 19
Miami is looking for a player to contribute right away, and Johnson will do just that. He can spell a creaky Luol Deng and help a defense that ranked 21st last season.

NO. 11—PACERS

CAMERON PAYNE 6-2 | 183 | PG | Murray State | Age 20
The buzz is that Indiana would love to pair Paul George with Payne, a high-IQ guard who can get to the rim. But Sacramento and Denver are showing interest too.

NO. 12—JAZZ

MYLES TURNER 6-11 | 239 | F/C | Texas | Age 19
Turner is raw, but if he hits his ceiling, he'll stretch the floor and protect the rim with that 9-foot-4 standing reach. Utah likes its young core, so it can afford to wait.

NO. 13—SUNS

FRANK KAMINSKY 7-1 | 231 | C | Wisconsin | Age 22
Grab your shades, Big Frank. His 3-point ability (41.6 percent) will help (Phoenix was 20th in 3PT% in '14-15), and he'll be able to spell both PF Markieff Morris and C Alex Len.

NO. 14—THUNDER

KELLY OUBRE 6-7 | 202 | G/F | Kansas | Age 19
OKC is not in love with its throng of mediocre wings. Oubre, who averaged 17.6/9.5 per 40 minutes in his one year in Lawrence, could very well solve that problem.

NO. 15—HAWKS

BOBBY PORTIS 6-11 | 246 | PF | Arkansas | Age 20

NO. 16—CELTICS

TREY LYLES 6-10 | 241 | PF | Kentucky | Age 19

NO. 17—BUCKS

SAM DEKKER 6-9 | 218 | SF | Wisconsin | Age 21

NO. 18—ROCKETS

TYUS JONES 6-2 | 184 | PG | Duke | Age 19

NO. 19—WIZARDS

KEVON LOONEY 6-9 | 222 | PF | UCLA | Age 19

NO. 20—RAPTORS

RASHAD VAUGHN 6-6 | 198 | SG | UNLV | Age 18

NO. 21—MAVERICKS

JERIAN GRANT 6-4 | 198 | G | Notre Dame | Age 22

NO. 22—BULLS

DELON WRIGHT 6-5 | 181 | PG | Utah | Age 23

NO. 23—TRAIL BLAZERS

R.J. HUNTER 6-6 | 185 | SG | Georgia State | Age 21

NO. 24—CAVALIERS

RONDAE HOLLIS-JEFFERSON 6-7 | 211 | G/F | Arizona | Age 20

NO. 25—GRIZZLIES

JUSTIN ANDERSON 6-6 | 231 | G/F | Virginia | Age 21

NO. 26—SPURS

MONTREZL HARRELL 6-8 | 253 | PF | Louisville | Age 21

NO. 27—LAKERS

JOSEPH YOUNG 6-2 | 182 | G | Oregon | Age 22

NO. 28—CELTICS

CHRISTIAN WOOD 6-11 | 216 | PF | UNLV | Age 19

NO. 29—NETS

JARELL MARTIN 6-9 | 239 | PF | LSU | Age 21

NO. 30—WARRIORS

CHRIS McCULLOUGH 6-9 | 199 | PF | Syracuse | Age 20



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FLAVORS



SCOUTTAKE

MOBILE
HOT SPOT

Score one for the scouts: Five years after Duke's Jahlil Okafor received his first college scholarship offer at 14, he's projected to be a top-two pick on June 25. But is he mobile enough to take the next leap? We asked an NBA scout to critique his game and had our Insiders, and the NCAA champion center himself, respond.

JAHILIL OKAFOR

HEIGHT 6-11	WEIGHT 270	AGE 19
PPG 17.3	RPG 8.5	FG% 66.4

THE SCOUT

Okafor is as advanced offensively as any 19-year-old big I've seen. His post moves are not only the best in the draft, I think they're better than those of most NBA vets.¹ He's not a great athlete, but he has pristine footwork and huge hands and can spin off either shoulder to finish at the basket.² An underrated part of his game is his high basketball IQ.³ But he doesn't have a great perimeter game, and he plays below the rim.⁴ He's an average defender at best.⁵ And I worry about his conditioning.⁶ Ten years ago, he'd have been the No. 1 pick hands down, but the league has evolved, and the bigs who thrive are mobile, defend and can stretch a defense.⁷ But he's one of the best players in this draft. I'd be shocked if he doesn't average 20 ppg in the NBA. His offense is that special.⁸

1 CHAD FORD,
NBA INSIDER

Totally agree. I've sat with GMs and scouts and watched him do things where we just look at each other with our mouths wide open.

2 JAHILIL OKAFOR

I'm 19 and improving every day, so saying I'm not a great athlete is crazy. I have three workouts a day to improve my skills.

3 FORD

It's clear how much work he's put in. Big men are lucky to have one go-to move when they get to the NBA. Okafor has four or five.

4 KEVIN PELTON,
NBA INSIDER

True. And here's another red flag: He shot 51 percent from the stripe. Among NBA players with 200 attempts last season, just five shot a lower percentage.

5 OKAFOR

I don't concern myself with those who think I have deficiencies on defense. Who at my age is a fully developed player? You never know how someone can transform their speed, movements, quickness.

6 AMIN ELHASSAN, NBA INSIDER, EX-SCOUT

Being in a professional environment, eating healthy—as opposed to cafeteria fare—makes staying in shape easier.

7 ELHASSAN

Absolutely. I don't mind his lack of perimeter game, but the mobility and defense are huge question marks.

8 FORD

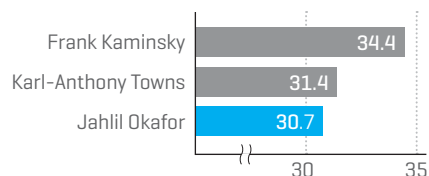
The debate between him and Karl-Anthony Towns is the same as Andrew Wiggins and Jabari Parker last year: Towns has the higher ceiling; Okafor is ready now.



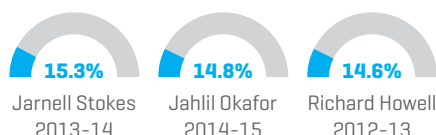
INSIDE MAN

Yeah, Okafor is iffy on D. So what? He led the nation in points per possession at the rim and had the second-highest offensive rebound rate since 2011.*

TOP PLAYERS IN PER, 2014-15



TOP OFFENSIVE REBOUND RATES SINCE 2010-11*

HE SHOOTS?
HE SCORES

Okafor's offensive ranks inside? He was in the 99th percentile on shots near the rim and the 98th as the roll man on pick-and-rolls.

1.61
POINTS PER
POSSESSION
AT THE RIM

*AMONG MAJOR-CONFERENCE PLAYERS WHO PLAYED 30-PLUS MINUTES PER GAME. STATS COURTESY SPORTS-REFERENCE.COM, SYNERGY SPORTS

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Greller (left) offers golfer Spieth—and you!—his vast local knowledge.

THE INSIDE MAN

By the time of the U.S. Open [June 18-21], the Chambers Bay course near Tacoma, Washington, will be just shy of its eighth birthday, making it the youngest venue to host the Open in 45 years. This is great news for fans of golf held on untested, bedeviling, windswept links—less good news for golfers hacking their way around it for the first time. Lucky for Masters champ and 21-year-old wunderkind Jordan Spieth, he has a dogleg up on his rivals. His caddie, Michael Greller, is a former local looper at Chambers Bay and thus owns more insight than most into this chessboard of a course that offers, as he puts it, “more options than any U.S. Open ever.” To wit: Holes 1, 16 and 18 are veritable accordions, able to be expanded and contracted at the whim of the USGA—and the holes where the U.S. Open will likely be won and lost. Here, Greller reveals how to pass Chambers’ tests. —MICHAEL COLLINS

HOLE

1

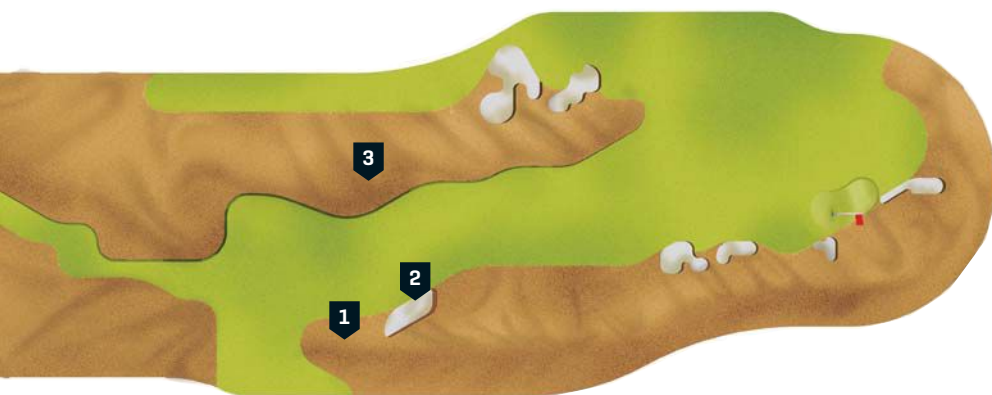
HOLE

16

HOLE

18

JORDAN SPIETH IS REALLY GOOD, AND WE HAVE THE STATS TO PROVE IT ...



IF IT'S A PAR 4 | 496 YARDS

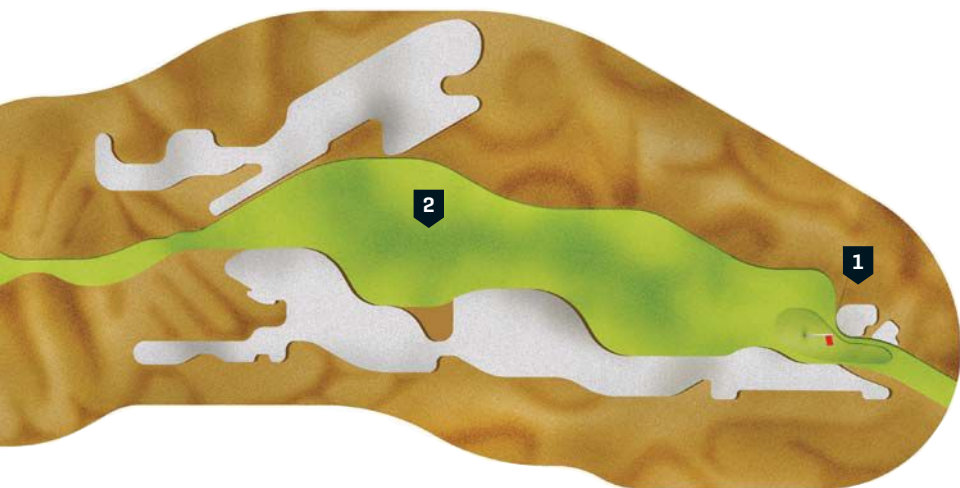
Greller: "You're faced with one of the toughest—if not *the* toughest—holes on the course. Any tee shot hanging out to the right [1], good luck finding your ball. Anything in the left rough, it'll be nearly impossible to reach the green. If you hit the fairway, you should have a midiron in, depending on the wind direction."

IF IT'S A PAR 5 | 598 YARDS

"This bunker [2] is about 320 yards out. It'll gobble up any tee shot right; these fairways are firm and fescue-based, so balls are really gonna roll. This mound [3] blocks out part of the left side of the fairway. It's about 320 to clear that. The left rough is extremely thick and will force a layup."

ON THE GREEN

"Anything at the left-center or left edge of the green will be repelled by a ridge, leaving you with a very difficult bump-and-run into the bank. You have to be right of any pin on the left. But if you end up in the dune right, there's a good chance you won't hold the green."

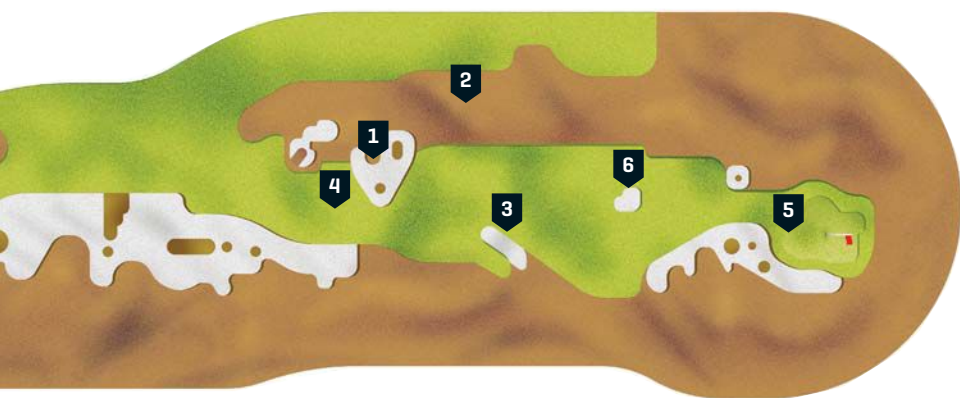


IF IT'S DRIVABLE | 323 YARDS*

Greller: "On the days they set the hole up to be drivable, they'll probably use the back pin, which I think is the toughest on the course. It's about nine or 10 yards wide back there. If you do go for it and you miss your drive left [1], you have almost no chance of getting anywhere within 50 feet of that pin. You have to play toward the middle or front part of the green and just hope that it somehow doesn't roll into the right bunker. You could see someone make a two here and someone make a five or six."

IF IT'S NOT DRIVABLE | 423 YARDS

"It's a pretty generous landing area. This should be one of the most hit fairways. I like my guy hitting it a max of 295 off the tee [2]—which will be a 3-wood for a lot of guys with how firm and fast it'll be playing. There's a premium on controlling your wedge shot into the green. Everything kicks hard left to right, so you don't want to miss it left. It's a very fast putt or chip back toward the Puget Sound on the right."



IF IT'S A PAR 4 | 525 YARDS

Greller: "These bunkers on the left [1] aren't really in play; it'll be 250 yards to carry them. You can even get to the green if you miss left [2]. But if you're in this bunker down the right [3], you have no chance. The shot calls for some kind of midiron from there, but the depth of the bunker won't allow you to do that."

IF IT'S A PAR 5 | 604 YARDS

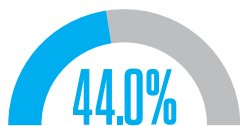
"Hit a good drive [4] and you've got from 230 to 260 to the green—all uphill. Let's call it 260. If you cover 250 [5], you take the right bunkers out of play; that's a *big* reward. But lay back and this deep bunker [6] can be worse than a water hazard."

ON THE GREEN

"The green is probably the trickiest one on the course. It has four different sections, and if you get on the wrong tier, it's an extremely difficult two-putt. Everything funnels right to left, so if you're in the right bunker when the pin is on the right, you're in trouble. You have to miss left so you're chipping or putting back up the hill."

2015 ONE-PUTT PERCENTAGE

Spieth ranks fifth on the PGA Tour



2015 PGA TOUR EARNINGS

Next closest player: Jimmy Walker

SPIETH: \$5.7M

WALKER: \$4.1M

MOST FIRST- OR SECOND-PLACE FINISHES BEFORE AGE 22**

JORDAN SPIETH	11
TIGER WOODS	7
SERGIO GARCIA	6

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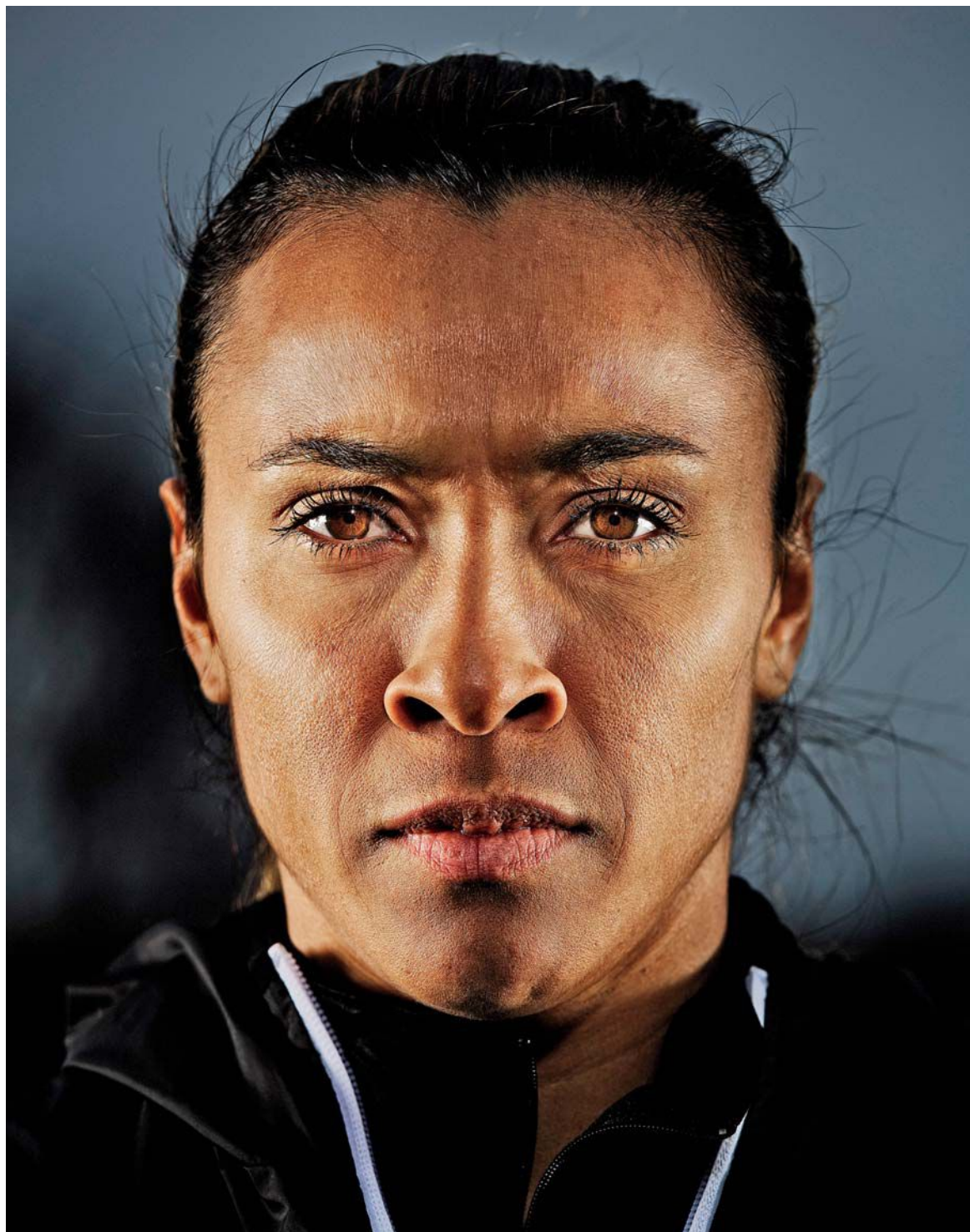
FOR THE LOVE OF FUTEBOL

Brazilian legend Marta Vieira da Silva, five-time FIFA World Player of the Year, has one glaring omission from her résumé: a World Cup trophy. Before the tournament kicked off on June 6, Marta, 29, spoke with *The Mag* about spending most of her pro career in Sweden and what it would mean to bring a title back to her homeland. —BONNIE D. FORD

THE MAG: What is it about the life and culture in Sweden, after playing nine seasons there, that touches your soul?

MARTA: The way of life, how relaxed people are while they do their jobs, [living] more comfortably. It's been so many years that I've been here in this country, and people accepted me in such a warm way that I wound up falling in love. Because if I stop to think about everything that's happened in my life, positive things started happening when I came to Sweden. When I go to the store, people come up and tell me they're really happy I'm here and they all root for me and they like my work. It's an acknowledgment.

You've applied for Swedish citizenship. Why is it important to make that official?
I consider this place my second home, so



PRESENTS

COLD HARD FACTS

Need proof of the USWNT's World Cup dominance? Check the record books. —NICK HARRIS

75%

The U.S. has won a full three-quarters of its games at the World Cup: 27 of 36.

98

Team USA's 98 World Cup goals tops all other nations. Its 2.72 goals per game trails only Germany.

.89

The U.S. is one of two teams, along with Germany, with a goals-conceded average of less than one per game.

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FOR BONNIE D. FORD'S FULL FEATURE
ON MARTA, GO TO ESPNW.COM

it's an option, after I've stopped playing, to maybe live in Sweden or maintain a contact with this country I feel such an affinity for. Brazil is my first option after I stop playing. It's my country. I have my roots there, so I'm hugely proud of it. I have it in mind that I'll be able to do something [to help] women's soccer move forward there. Who knows, maybe I'll live in both countries. Six months over there, six months over here.

Your current Swedish coach, Markus Tilly, told me that sometimes he has to encourage you to be a star, to take more shots. Why is that? Do you play much differently here from in Brazil?

No, I always try to be very team-based. Maybe sometimes I don't realize I have the credibility to make decisions, to make a play that's more individual in some situations. So he does sometimes come talk to me. I really do have that flaw, and I try to correct it day to day.

Early in your childhood, you had to fight to get a chance to play. Do you feel more supported now than you did when you were starting your career?

Oh, absolutely. The support I have today is way different from when I made the decision to make a living in soccer. The support then was almost nonexistent. The way they looked at it many years ago, when I started playing with boys, it was really something ridiculous to those people. And now it's something fantastic. "Gosh, she grew up, she fought, she succeeded in life. She's a role model for lots of girls wanting to follow that same path."

You're always asked about equality and facing financial difficulties with teams. It sometimes takes energy away from your playing, doesn't it?

It really does take up a lot of your energy, always having to explain, always having to somehow ask for support, ask for help. It's this key that we're constantly hitting, every day, every time we have the option and opportunity to speak in front of cameras in interviews.

What is the closest you've had to a perfect moment in football?

The first year here in Sweden was super



This year's World Cup is Marta's fourth attempt at an elusive title.

positive. Everything was new. We won the UEFA Champions League. But I've also had good moments with Brazil in 2007 and 2008—we were runner-up at the World Cup, and we won the Olympic silver medal the following year. We were playing soccer in a way that was a pleasure to watch. But obviously, I can't forget the first time I won [FIFA World Player of the Year] in 2006. It was a magical situation. It was a dream ever since I was little, and I was able to fulfill it.

And what moment have you not had yet that you visualize the most?

Raising the World Cup trophy. Putting a gold medal on my chest in my country. Those are two moments I constantly dream of—this year the World Cup and next year the Rio Olympics. Those moments. They don't leave my mind, and I hope to be able to live them. ■



DRAFT DAY DECISIONS



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INTENTIONAL WALKING

WHO Richard Albero, Yankees fan

THE WALK Steinbrenner Field, Tampa, Florida, to Yankee Stadium, the Bronx

THE CAUSE Wounded Warrior Project

AMOUNT RAISED \$55,254

Lifelong Yankees fan Richard Albero, 65, retired to Florida from Dutchess County, New York, in 2008 with a dream of walking cross-country to honor his nephew Gary, who was killed on 9/11. “I realized that wasn’t feasible,” he says, “but I could walk to New York.” So he took to the byways. His trek from the Yankees’ spring training home began on March 2 and covered nearly 1,200 miles over 86 days while raising funds for the Wounded Warrior Project. Donors could contribute in the name of former Yankees at each mile, from the mundane (\$10 for Herb Crompton) to the majestic (\$2,500 for Babe Ruth). But Albero says most people didn’t pick a player: “They just gave.” Albero, with nearly 200 miles to go, took a break at the statue of the young Bambino at Camden Yards (left) before his journey home continued. We joined him for a few miles along the way.



**THE 7 A.M. STRETCH**

A typical day for Albero began with an Epsom salt bath and extensive stretching before he walked for eight hours and up to 20 miles. "Even athletes come up with injuries," says Albero, who cut only one day short, because of a blister. "I got nothing."

**ONE TEAM**

Albero was treated well all along the Eastern Seaboard. Red Sox fans in South Carolina offered him food; a man identifying himself as a Braves fan made a donation. And when the Wounded Warrior Project heard about his mission, the charity got Albero's hotel tabs comped. Here in Orioles country, he received encouragement from one of his countless well-wishers.

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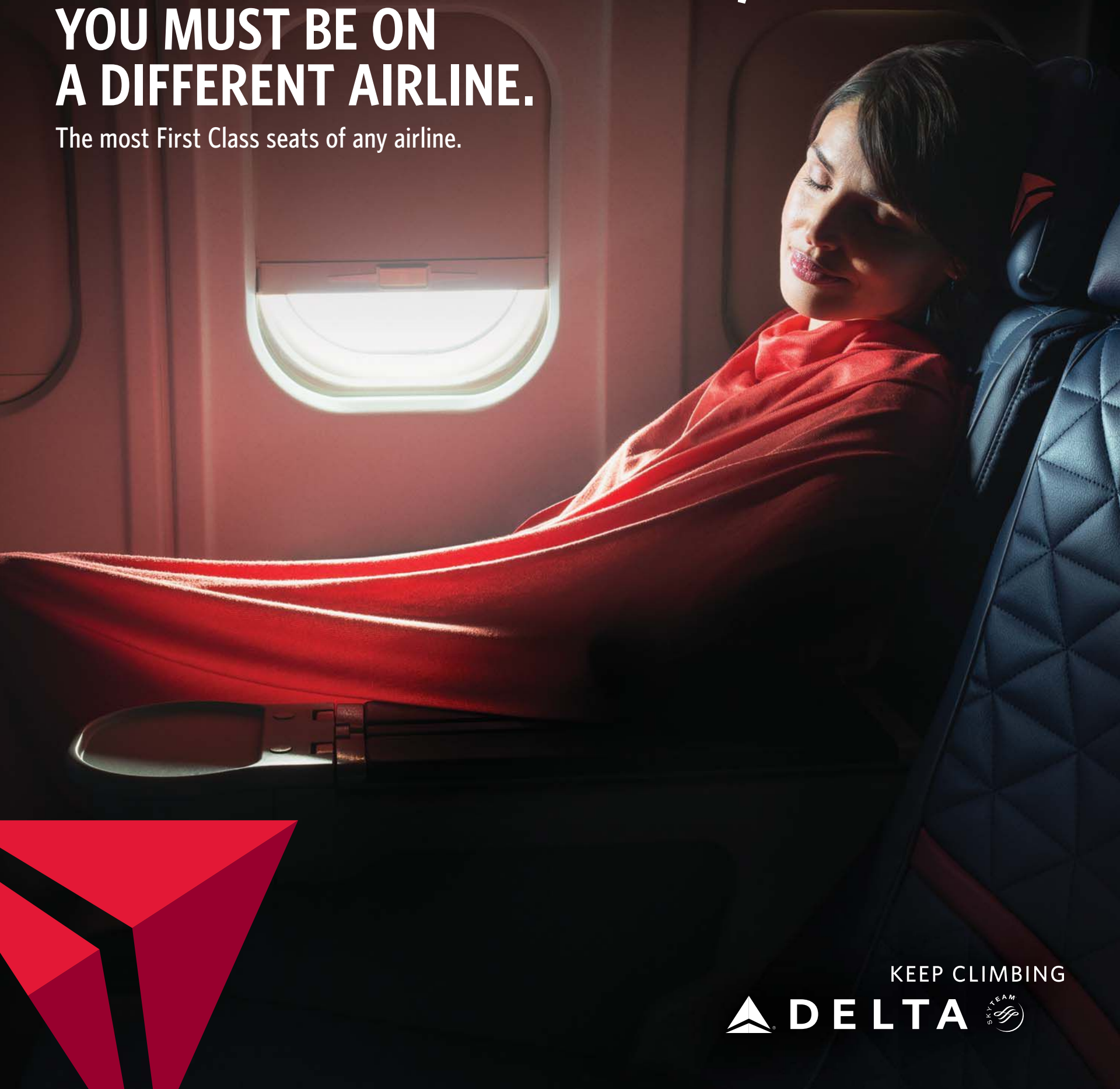


ROUNDING THIRD

A daily ice bath gave Albero time to reflect on the trip's purpose and account for the physical toll of, for example, 49 hills in Virginia ("I counted," he says). Albero went through just three pairs of sneakers, although his feet swelled from size 8 to 9½ by the time he reached the Bronx. When he arrived at Yankee Stadium on May 26, he emphatically stomped on home plate, with relief. The team donated \$25,000 to the cause and surprised Albero by having him throw out the first pitch. So while he won't cop to a favorite mile, he beams when talking about No. 680, dedicated to Yanks manager and former catcher Joe Girardi. "Joe and I built a quick relationship," he says. "It was just like being a next-door neighbor." Maybe because Albero had finally made it home. —ANTHONY OLIVIERI

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"You are from a village and you climbed Everest," Nimdoma Sherpa [second from left] recalls a girl saying. "So I want to be a doctor."



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After the Seven Summits

A GROUP OF NEPALI WOMEN FIRST DEFIED THE ODDS BY CLIMBING THE TALLEST MOUNTAIN ON EACH CONTINENT. NOW THEY ARE FACING THEIR GREATEST CHALLENGE: REBUILDING THEIR COUNTRY AFTER TWO EARTHQUAKES.

BY ALYSSA ROENIGK

THE MUD HOME 35-year-old Maya Gurung once shared with her mother and three younger siblings in central Nepal has been reduced to rubble. The building where she became one of few girls in her village to attend school is a mound of papers and dust. As Maya searches for her mother in April, a line of men and women shuffle past her like zombies, leaves stuffed into their nostrils to mask the smell of rotting carcasses and defecation. When she finds her mother, she runs to her, collapsing into her arms. Her mother tells her of the deaths of two of her cousins.

There are no tears, no time for grief. Maya and the 17 young volunteers she brought from Kathmandu hand out bags of rice and tarps, the only supplies that had reached her village in the Sindhupalchok region, where families sleep in the rain on piles of hay.

"Together, we can rebuild Nepal," she says.

MAYA DIDN'T KNOW the word for mountain the first time she gazed at the peak on the outskirts of her village. The ragged shape outlined against the cold morning sky seemed to hang from the heavens like an ornament.

One Sherpa man selling baskets of potatoes to the women of her village spoke of climbing Nepal's tallest mountain. "What is Mount Everest?" 7-year-old Maya asked her mother. "Can I go there?"

"It's the tallest mountain in the world," her mother said. "It's too dangerous. No place for a girl." But Maya couldn't let go. She longed to see Everest up close, to stand at the tippy-top of everything and take in the view.

"Someday I will marry a Sherpa man," she thought. "And he will take me to see Mount Everest with my own eyes."

"SHAILEE! HURRY UP! Future doctors aren't late for school." While her mother waited at the front door of their modest middle-class home in Kathmandu, 7-year-old Shailee Basnet sat in the bathroom upstairs. Her eyes were closed, her back pin straight, her hands stretched out as if gripping an imaginary paddle. She pictured herself on the rapids of a wild river, white water rushing over her kayak as she steered around rock clusters. The muscular man paddling the blue kayak in the picture on the bottle of Sherpa soap smiled back at her.

"Sometimes I wish I were a boy," she thought. "Then I could be smart and brave."

AT 14, MAYA was two years from a miracle. She was on track to become one of the first girls in her village—known as a top district in Nepal for trafficking women—to finish high school.

Her father had other plans, though. He had chosen her a husband and brought her to his home in Kathmandu to prepare for her wedding. But Maya agonized over her future. She thought she was too young to be a wife. "I want to finish school," she said to her father. He scoffed. "What would you do with an education?" he asked. Her aunt chimed in, telling her she would never be anything more than a poor village woman.

Twenty years later, Maya remembers the count of the rupees she stole from her father: 150, roughly \$2.30. She sneaked out of his house and took a taxi to the bus station. She woke up



"Village after village, everything is gone," Shailee says. "There are hardly any buildings standing."

the next morning in a depot in the far eastern district of Jhapa, more than 250 miles away.

The next day, Jhapan police officers returned Maya to her school. Now girls who were once her friends ignored her. Their fathers told them not to be like Maya: She was a disgrace. When she finished school, she visited her father to ask for forgiveness. Instead, he showed her a video: "He had performed the rituals of my death, burned photographs of me and filmed it for me to watch," she says. "He did not want to forgive."

But Maya felt anything but dead. For the first time, she felt alive.

SHAILEE REMEMBERS THE moment she too felt reborn. It was 2007. She was 24 years old, two years out of college and a writer at *Himal*, an adventure magazine based in Kathmandu. She had been assigned a story on a climber and model named Susmita Maskey, a progressive Nepali woman who'd made a name for herself as an adventurer and mountaineer.

During the interview, Susmita talked about the lack of female climbers in Nepal, the macho culture that surrounded mountaineering and the fact that of the more than 4,000 people who'd reached the top of Everest since the first ascent in 1953, only seven were Nepali women. The first, Pasang Lhamu, reached the 29,035-foot summit in 1993 but died on the descent. Of the hundreds of people from all over the world who climb Everest each year,

only one in 11 is a woman.

As Susmita discussed the all-female expedition she was coordinating with fellow climbers for the next spring, petite Shailee imagined herself on the mountain with that group. "I'd always heard of foreigners saving for years to come to Nepal and go to the mountains," Shailee says. "I wondered what they did there. For us, the mountains are for work. But for foreigners, they are for fun. I wanted to look at Nepal like a foreigner. I wanted to have adventures."

That night, she couldn't sleep. She thought about what it meant to be a girl. Could she be smart and brave? Successful and athletic? "Is Everest out there for me too?" she wondered.

Soon, she called Susmita and asked to try out for the expedition. Susmita said yes and invited her to training.

AFTER FINISHING 10TH GRADE, Maya traveled to Hong Kong and Macau. She took voice lessons and a fashion design course. "I was never satisfied," she says. "I tried it all."

In 2006, a Sherpa friend challenged Maya to join a monthlong mountaineering course. She began running and hiking, opting to walk instead of taking cabs. Still, the first weeks of the course were brutal. On even the shortest hikes at altitude, her legs and lungs burned. Her hands and forearms weakened after a few minutes on the climbing wall.

But by the end of the month, she'd learned

360s, 720s, 1080s

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AMERICA'S
NAVY

how to set up camp, what medicines she could take at altitude and how to assist in a crevasse rescue. But more than anything, she had learned she was a mountain climber.

When her instructor invited her to climb Everest in the spring of 2008 with a team of female climbers, including Susmita, she did not hesitate. The goal was to start a conversation about gender equality and to attract more women to mountaineering. "I knew this was meant for me," Maya says.

She thought about the hours she'd spent dreaming of standing at the summit of Everest. And now she didn't need a husband to take her.

OF THE GROUP of women at mountaineering training, Shailee was last to finish the run on Day 1. On the climbing wall, she could barely grasp the handholds. As her partner lowered her, she feared what the others thought of her.

She wanted to make them understand that she didn't grow up herding buffalo like Asha Kumari Singh, the girl from the flatlands, or carrying buckets of water up flights of stairs like Chunu Shrestha. "I was a city girl," Shailee says. "My friends looked like me; they had the same problems as me. I was blind to real problems. These women were so heroic."

"Shailee, you've almost got it! Just try not to stick your butt out so much," Asha said as she helped Shailee remove her climbing harness.

"Use your legs more next time: They are strong!" Nimdoma Sherpa said. "Don't

make your arms do so much work."

Shailee paused. These girls weren't judging her. They were offering advice. "I'd never met girls like these before," Shailee says. "But I knew that whether I climbed Everest or not, I needed them in my life."

AS THE MONTHLONG Everest expedition neared, the team's number dwindled to 10. Of them, only Susmita and Usha Bist had ever attempted to climb a mountain. Some of the women were weeded out by the training, others by the time commitment or the negativity that surrounded their mission. "People did not believe we would make it," says Chunu, whose father had grown ill in the months leading up to the climb. "Some said five or six of us would die."

A few of the women even hid their training from friends and family and hiked and climbed in secret. Shailee informed her parents bit by bit, at first telling them that she was writing a story about the women. Respected professionals, her parents were extremely pragmatic, and she knew they would balk at her participation. But when a photograph of the 10 women appeared in the national paper, her cover was blown. "My parents were worried, but they came to a conclusion that if they tried to stop me, I wouldn't listen," Shailee says.

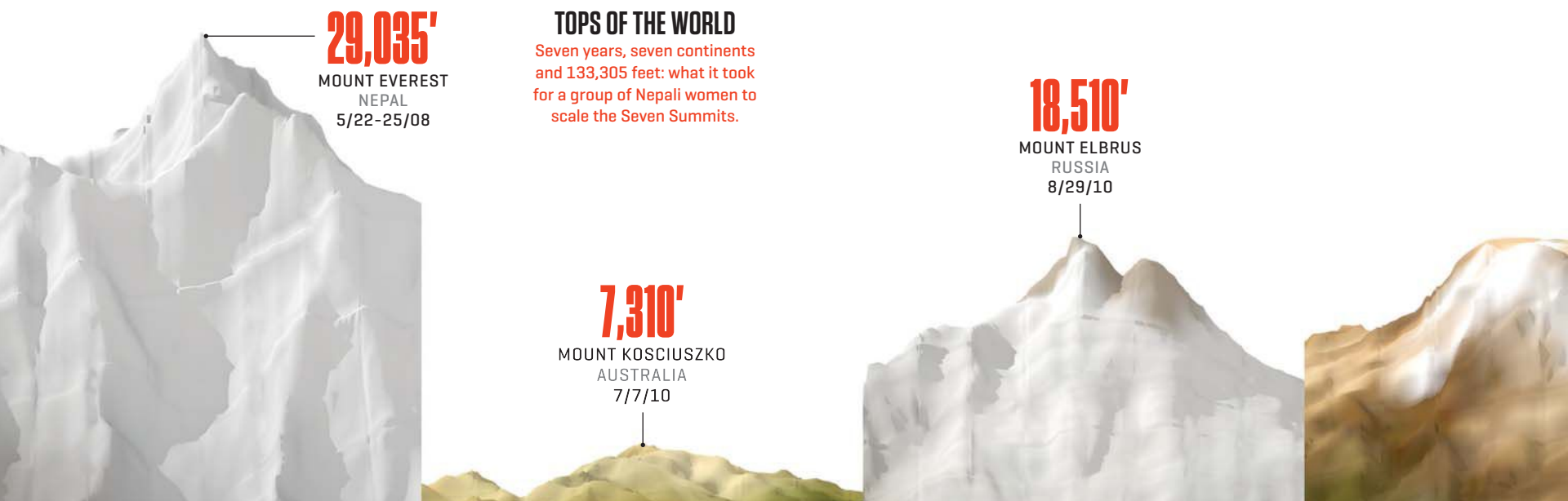
Soon it was time for the women to say goodbye to their families. Some thanked parents and siblings for their support; others had to answer for their actions. "Many people asked,

'Why are you leaving when your father is sick?'" Chunu says. "My brother asked why I wanted to die. I didn't want to die. I wanted to do something big for women."

AFTER A TURBULENT flight from Kathmandu and a harrowing landing on the short, sloped runway at Tenzing-Hillary Airport in Lukla, the women began the roughly 26-mile trek to Everest Base Camp. "I remember looking back at the steep runway and wondering if we would walk this path again," Shailee says. "Then we walked with our heads down. We didn't take in the beauty of the region. We were too scared to think any thoughts that distracted us from our goal."

That spring, Everest was a hotbed of conflict. In advance of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, "Free Tibet" protests had broken out on the mountain, calling attention to China's occupation of Tibet. Nepali soldiers and policemen were stationed along the route. In other years, an expedition of 10 Nepali women and their guides might have generated buzz, but they arrived at base camp on April 28 to little fanfare.

Everest Base Camp rests at 17,590 feet, an altitude the women had experienced during their training, yet the real thing felt different. The temperatures were colder than they had imagined, the air thinner and the pace slower. Although they carried only their packs and spent long hours acclimatizing while their guides set their lines and set up camp, the toll on their bodies was greater than they had anticipated.



29,035'

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TOPS OF THE WORLD

Seven years, seven continents
and 133,305 feet: what it took
for a group of Nepali women to
scale the Seven Summits.

7,310'

MOUNT KOSCIUSZKO
AUSTRALIA
7/7/10

18,510'

MOUNT ELBRUS
RUSSIA
8/29/10



The most ordinary functions of daily life became arduous. While the men could relieve themselves into a plastic bottle or by zipping open a slit in their tents at night, the women had to venture outside and expose their bare legs and backsides in temperatures well below zero. “It was miserable,” says Nimdoma, who was only 17 years old at the time.

The women rarely interacted with members of other expeditions. At the time, only Shailee and Susmita spoke fluent English. “We saw the girls at Camp 1 and Camp 2,” says Danuru Sherpa, a well-respected guide who has summited Everest 16 times. “They were small. I thought something bad would happen. I thought maybe a few would summit. Some Sherpa guides made bets on how many would die.” At 5-foot-3, Maya was the tallest; Nimdoma was 4-10.

The women kept their heads down and trusted in their training, climbing approximately five to 10 hours a day. When they felt too cold to take another step, too tired or too discouraged,

they sang songs and told jokes. They climbed slower than they thought they were capable of climbing and sometimes slower than their legs wanted to move. If they had learned anything in the course of their training, it was that the most dangerous element on Everest is not altitude or falling ice but hubris. “With each step, we went higher than we’d ever been before,” Chunu says. “We’d never been to base camp or Camp 2 or Camp 3. Each step was success.”

“One more step” was their mantra. One more step had to be enough. The experience was personal for each woman, but as a team they never talked about reaching the summit. Success meant returning home. “So many people die on the way back down because they are careless and think, ‘I climbed Mount Everest,’” Chunu says. “But summit or not, you have to get back down safely.”

THE EXPEDITION TO the summit from Camp 4 was divided into two teams. On May 22, 2008,

the first group, including Pujan Acharya, Pema Diki Sherpa, Susmita, Maya and Nim and their Sherpa guides, successfully reached the summit of Everest. But around 1 that morning, Shailee got separated from the group and was forced to turn around. On the way back to Camp 4, Shailee and her guide passed a Swiss climber who had collapsed and died on his return from the summit the day before. “That night was the toughest for me,” Shailee says. “Here was this man; he was wearing better equipment, he was taller than me and probably better prepared. I thought, ‘Is this mountain divine or monstrous?’”

Ready to try again, Shailee emerged from her tent cloaked in a yellow summit suit, an oxygen mask, glacier goggles and gloves. She and her guide joined the second group and began the gradual uphill march slowly, each step more taxing than the last. After more than 11 hours, they reached the summit on May 24.

With her final step on May 22, Nimdoma, the first girl educated in her family, became the youngest woman to summit Everest. (Her record was most recently eclipsed by 13-year-old Malavath Purna of India in June 2014.) Maya, then 28, became the first person from her village and her ethnic group, Gurung. Asha, the girl from the flatlands, became the first from her village. When the 10th and final woman reached the summit on May 25, the “First Inclusive Women Sagarmatha Expedition Spring 2008” became the most successful

19,341'
MOUNT KILIMANJARO
TANZANIA
3/5/13

22,822'
MOUNT ACONCAGUA
ARGENTINA
2/23/14

20,237'
DENALI (MOUNT MCKINLEY)
UNITED STATES
6/24/14

16,050'
VINSON MASSIF
ANTARCTICA
12/23/14

all-woman expedition in Everest history, and the number of Nepali women who had reached the top of the mountain more than doubled. “People said we were too ordinary and Everest too extraordinary,” Shailee says. “We knew Everest would not grow a new path for us because we’re short or because we were inexperienced. We had to be as good as the goal demanded us to be.”

Shailee looked out at the island peaks floating in an ocean of white clouds below. Tears of joy froze to her cheeks behind her protective goggles. Maya stood off by herself. She had taken her goggles off, exposing her eyes to the freezing wind and blinding snow glare.

Shailee ran to her. “Put your glasses back on,” she urged. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I need to see Everest with my own eyes,” Maya said.

THE WOMEN RETURNED to the airport in Kathmandu to hundreds of Nepali people chanting their names.

Chunu scanned the crowd for her brother and mother, but they were nowhere to be found. When she saw her cousin waving to her from the crowd, she knew instantly why he had been sent. “My dad was gone,” she says. Her family was sitting in mourning.

Mothers and fathers from across Nepal had brought their daughters to meet the women who climbed Everest. Hand-held signs declared Maya, a girl once disgraced in her own village, a national hero. “Men were telling their daughters to be like me,” she says. “To be like Maya.”

In the months that followed, the women met in Kathmandu and drank cups of black tea as they had done to keep warm at Everest Base Camp. They’d been given an opportunity, they felt, perhaps the rarest resource for girls in their part of the world. Everest had revealed within them strengths they’d never known they possessed. They wanted to share their experience, use it as a platform to show girls they could be meant for more than marriage. “If we stopped after Everest, we would be lost in history,” Asha says. “We knew we must do something bigger.”

They organized weekly hikes for women around Kathmandu and told the story of their climb. They visited schools and shared photos from the summit of Everest. They told the students they could do anything they dreamed. On Jan. 1, 2009, the women gathered to



Shailee (top) and Maya are leading a program in Nepal to rebuild five schools in Maya’s village.

celebrate as a family. “We asked each other how we could make every year as special as the one we’d just had,” Shailee says.

They decided to climb another mountain. Six others, in fact. “No Nepali woman had ever reached the highest point on each continent,” Shailee says. The majority of the women had never even traveled outside of Nepal. Their next decision was arguably either their bravest or their most naive: They decided to go for the Seven Summits.

IN THE 35 YEARS since American climber Richard Bass conceived the adventure challenge of climbing the tallest mountain on each continent—and became the first person to do so—fewer than 400 people have successfully achieved the feat. The seven mountains widely recognized as making up the Seven Summits

are Mount Everest; Mount Kosciuszko in Australia (7,310 feet); Mount Elbrus in Russia (18,510 feet); Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (19,341 feet); Mount Aconcagua in Argentina (22,822 feet); Denali (Mount McKinley) in the United States (20,237 feet); and Vinson Massif in Antarctica (16,050 feet).

The women were tackling the remaining mountains on their own without Susmita or their Everest expedition leaders, Da Gombu Sherpa and Pemba Dorjee Sherpa. Still, after Everest in 2008, the next two summits came quickly for the women. On July 7, 2010, they reached the top of Australia’s Mount Kosciuszko. The next month, on Aug. 29, they took the final steps to the summit of Mount Elbrus in Russia. After each expedition, they visited schools, told their stories and stressed the importance of education.

But next came perhaps their toughest challenge: paying off the debt they had accrued to fund those climbs and raising money to complete the next four. A sponsored expedition, their Everest climb had been paid for by various companies and organizations. But now the women emptied their bank accounts, took out loans and lines of credit, and held fundraisers around Kathmandu. They booked paid speaking engagements and searched for sponsorship dollars. “Nobody wants to give money to fund something that already happened,” Shailee says. “And few people believed we would raise enough to climb the remaining four mountains.”

In total, they would need to raise more than \$1 million. Individually, none of them had ever had more than a few hundred dollars to her name. The average annual household income in Nepal is about \$700, so they needed to take their fundraising efforts on the road. As the days after the third summit turned into months, two of the climbers—Ngabhang Phuti Sherpa and Usha—dropped from the team. “There were no footsteps for us to follow, no blueprints laid out for us,” Shailee says. “But for the seven of us who remained, that made what we were doing even more special.”

NEARLY FIVE YEARS after climbing Everest, and more than two years after Elbrus, the seven remaining women reached the top of their fourth summit, Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, on March 5, 2013. They had raised the money.

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"THE GIRLS WERE SMALL. SOME SHERPA GUIDES MADE BETS ON HOW MANY WOULD DIE."

DANURU SHERPA

They had been patient. They had stayed together. "Any one team member could have climbed Kilimanjaro any day. Yet as a team, the mountain made us wait," Shailee says. "She was saying, 'Girls, you had to be mature enough for me.'"

The women planned to climb three mountains in 2014: Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, Denali in the United States and Vinson Massif in Antarctica. For the first time, they would make their ascents without the assistance of porters to carry their packs, set up camp and cook meals. On Denali they would climb without guides.

Halfway through their climb on Feb. 23, 2014, to the summit of Mount Aconcagua, a 22,822-foot peak located near the Chilean border, Shailee's right thumb began to freeze. She hoped that if she made it to Independencia, a rest point at 6,380 meters and about 2,000 feet from the summit, she could give her hand a chance to recover. But it kept getting worse. And the wind was picking up. Whiteout conditions fast approached. "We only had one window," she says. Soon, Maya, whose down jacket had worn thin, suffered a similar setback. "We were slowing down the rest of the team," Shailee says.

At Independencia, the women huddled inside a tiny wooden hut. Pujan, suffering from a lingering shoulder injury, said she also could no longer keep pace. "We told the rest of the girls to go ahead," Shailee says. They didn't talk for long. Knowing they needed to make a quick decision, the four others went on ahead to the summit.

The goal of each climb had been a safe return for all, but Shailee and Maya had never contemplated anything less than all seven women reaching every peak. Now, in the swirling winds and hurting, they made a tough decision and turned around. "There were a lot of tears," Shailee says. Maya felt as if they had lost.

The women had been home in Nepal for nearly a month when tragedy struck. On April 18, 2014, 16 Sherpa men, many of them their friends, were killed in an avalanche on the Khumbu Icefall on Everest. The women gathered at a hospital in Kathmandu to pay homage as the bodies of their friends and colleagues arrived by helicopter.

With only two months to prepare to leave for Denali, their most difficult climb, the women struggled to push aside the what-ifs. How had so

many talented men lost their lives when they were spared? "It was very heavy for everyone," Shailee says. "They were absorbing the risk for everybody else, sacrificing their lives."

The women reflected on that final day on Aconcagua, remembered how much they wanted to press on despite their pain. Only now, as they mourned the Sherpa men and celebrated their lives, did they begin to fully appreciate what had been at stake in each of their ascents. Life. Perhaps, they thought, their failure on Aconcagua—the decision to turn around and to listen to their bodies—was more valuable than it would have been for all of them to have succeeded in reaching the peak. Perhaps to press on would have meant they would not have returned home safely. "Four of our members got to the summit," Maya says. "As a team, we succeeded."

MAYA ARRIVED IN Alaska for the Denali climb about a week after the rest of her team and sick with pneumonia. She couldn't imagine missing another summit and pressed her team members to allow her to join them. But they decided it would be too dangerous for everyone. Pujan's shoulder was still causing her pain, so she too remained at base camp. Shailee, adamant that a coordinator should stay behind with those who could not climb, sent Asha, Chunu, Nim and Diki ahead to climb the sixth mountain without them.

The women spent 19 days on Denali, their progress continually halted by heavy snow and poor visibility. They struggled to walk in the chest-deep snow on the days when the skies were clear. They spent five days at Camp 4 at 14,200 feet before finally making a push for the 20,237-foot summit on June 24, 2014.

"Denali, for me, was most amazing," Nimdoma says. "It was so hard and so far from Nepal. It was like climbing another Everest. I

felt very special standing on the top of Denali."

At base camp, when word of the women's summit came down the mountain, Shailee, Maya and Pujan cried. And sang. And danced.

"I am so proud of my team," Maya says. "We are seven Wonder Women."

IN THE MONTHS leading up to Antarctica, the final climb, fundraising became the eighth summit. To climb Vinson Massif required approximately \$50,000 per climber, up to seven times as much as each of the previous climbs because of the high cost of travel, expert guides and the limited number of permits granted per season.

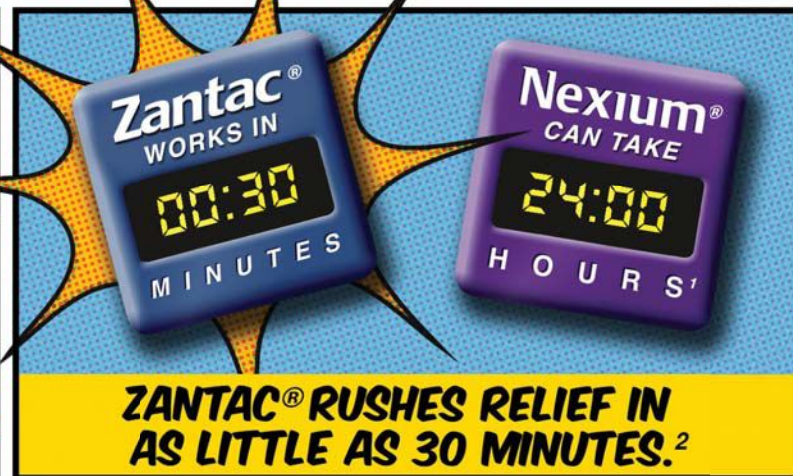
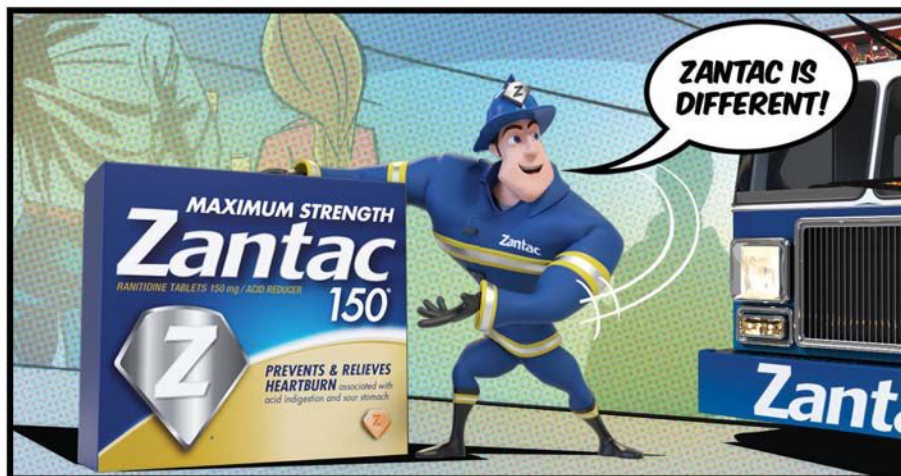
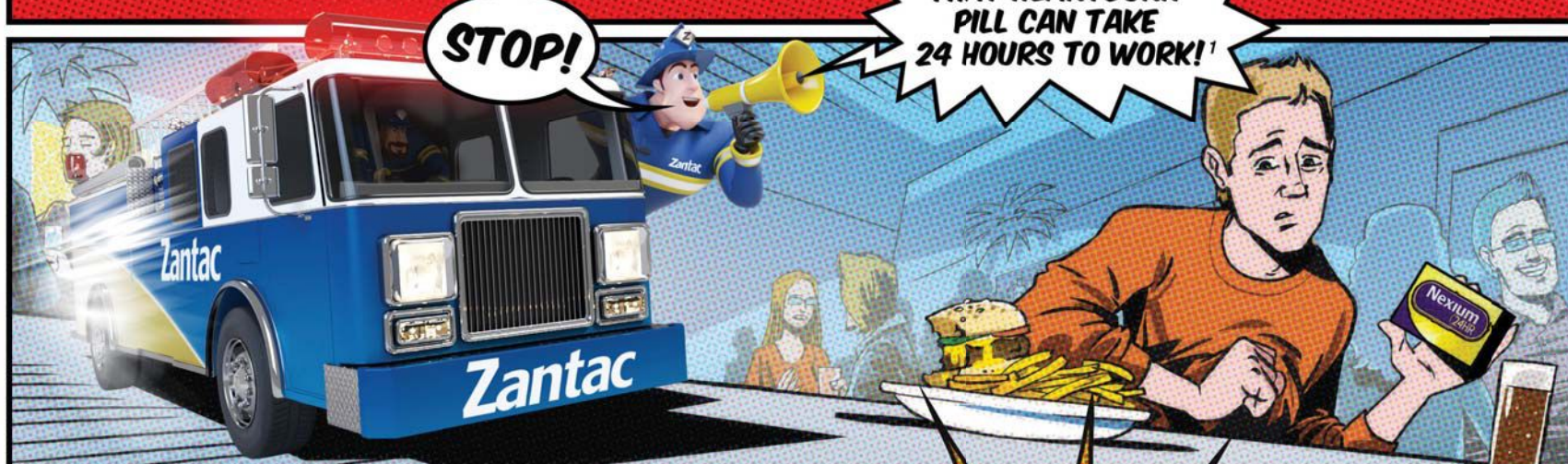
Over five months and by saving money from speaking fees, fundraisers and donations from the Nepal tourism board, the Nepalese government and Lions Club International (one of the world's largest service club organizations), the women raised enough for four women to climb the final summit. Asha, Nim, Diki and Chunu had reached each of the previous peaks. If they were to summit Vinson Massif, the team would have four members who had fully completed the Seven Summits. But in the years since Everest, Asha had become an accomplished climber and adventurer. She had no doubt she would someday climb Vinson Massif, with or without the team. Maya should go in her place, she said.

On Dec. 23, 2014, Shailee woke to the sound of her phone buzzing. It was Chunu's husband. "They made it," he said.

It had taken her friends only five days to reach the top of Vinson Massif, an unthinkable breakneck speed to reach the highest point on the Antarctic continent at 16,050 feet. From the day they landed at the base of the mountain, only 660 nautical miles from the South Pole, it had been windy and blustery cold. "It was negative 30 at the top. They literally had to run up and run down," Shailee says.

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Five of the enduring
climbers in Russia,
from near right: Pema
Diki, Nimdoma, Pujan,
Chunu and Asha.

At the summit, they hugged and high-fived and began their quick descent. Looking back, the moment felt anticlimactic, not like the magical final accomplishment they believed it would be. “We always talked about life after the last mountain,” Maya says. “We dreamed about life ‘after the Seven Summits.’”

It started as a way to prioritize their lives and as an inside joke. Have kids, get a real job, maybe learn to ski? We’ll get to it.

After the Seven Summits.

It evolved into a promise—to themselves, to their community, to the women and children of Nepal. Use their platform to empower women? Educate girls? Fight sex trafficking?

Absolutely. After the Seven Summits.

“Before we were home from Antarctica, we were saying, ‘This isn’t the end,’” Maya says. “We were ready for our next challenge. We wanted something more.”

In the months after the Seven Summits, the women founded a trekking company and began teaching English, outdoor skills and high-altitude techniques to women, training them to be assistant guides and passing along what they’d learned. They completed an outdoor curriculum to implement in Nepali schools and started a program that empowers survivors of sex trafficking and abuse through climbing and the outdoors. It began in Maya’s village, as would their relief efforts.

But the team would have to change course.

ON SATURDAY, April 25, 2015, the earth would not stand still.

Shailee and her husband, Tyler, were hiking in the hills outside of Kathmandu with friends. “As we climbed the tallest hill, I pointed out famous buildings in the skyline,” Shailee says. As she called out the nine-story Dharahara Tower, the tallest building in Nepal, the group paused to take it in.

Two hours later and just before noon, the first earthquake struck, a 7.8 magnitude centered about 50 miles from where they stood. Feeling protected by nature but fearful of trees uprooting, Shailee led the group into a field, where they waited for the aftershocks to subside. “When we felt it was safe, we began walking back toward the city,” she says. “At first, everything appeared normal. Then I saw it was gone.” The vertical space Dharahara Tower had filled only hours

earlier was now nothing but blue sky. “Then,” Shailee says, “we walked into a nightmare.”

For the next several days, the women gathered at a makeshift headquarters in Kathmandu, bringing with them the focus and determination that had carried them to the tops of mountains. They tapped into a network in the climbing and outdoor communities to organize volunteers, collect supplies and kick-start fundraising efforts to bring rice, tarps and medical personnel to far-reaching villages such as Maya’s and Nim’s, two of the hardest-hit districts in the country. Around them, the city of Kathmandu crumbled and the death toll rose to more than 8,000. Their friends and families lived in fear of mudslides, monsoons, starvation and illness.

They had never imagined this was how they would put to use the skills and strengths they had developed and uncovered within themselves over the past eight years, but they knew this was now their calling.

“We take it that it is our generation’s responsibility to bring the nation back,” Shailee says. “Our years together climbing these big moun-

tains has prepared us for this. We can’t do everything or be everywhere, but our team will lead others.”

MAYA WAS A teenager when she first learned the mountain she gazed at near her home was not Everest after all but Mount Jugal, a tiny sliver of stone in comparison. Now, as she stands near the base of Jugal, her village in ruins and with a long climb to recovery ahead, she knows her longing to stand on its peak has been the source of her hope.

When Maya started her journey, she saw firsthand the problems facing women in her village, but she felt powerless to affect anyone’s life but her own. When Shailee began, she wanted only to find strength within herself. All seven women set out on a journey of self-discovery and self-empowerment, but it is what they have chosen to do with their lives after the Seven Summits that will define them.

“This is the best chance we have,” Shailee says. “The whole world for the first time is looking at Nepal.” ■



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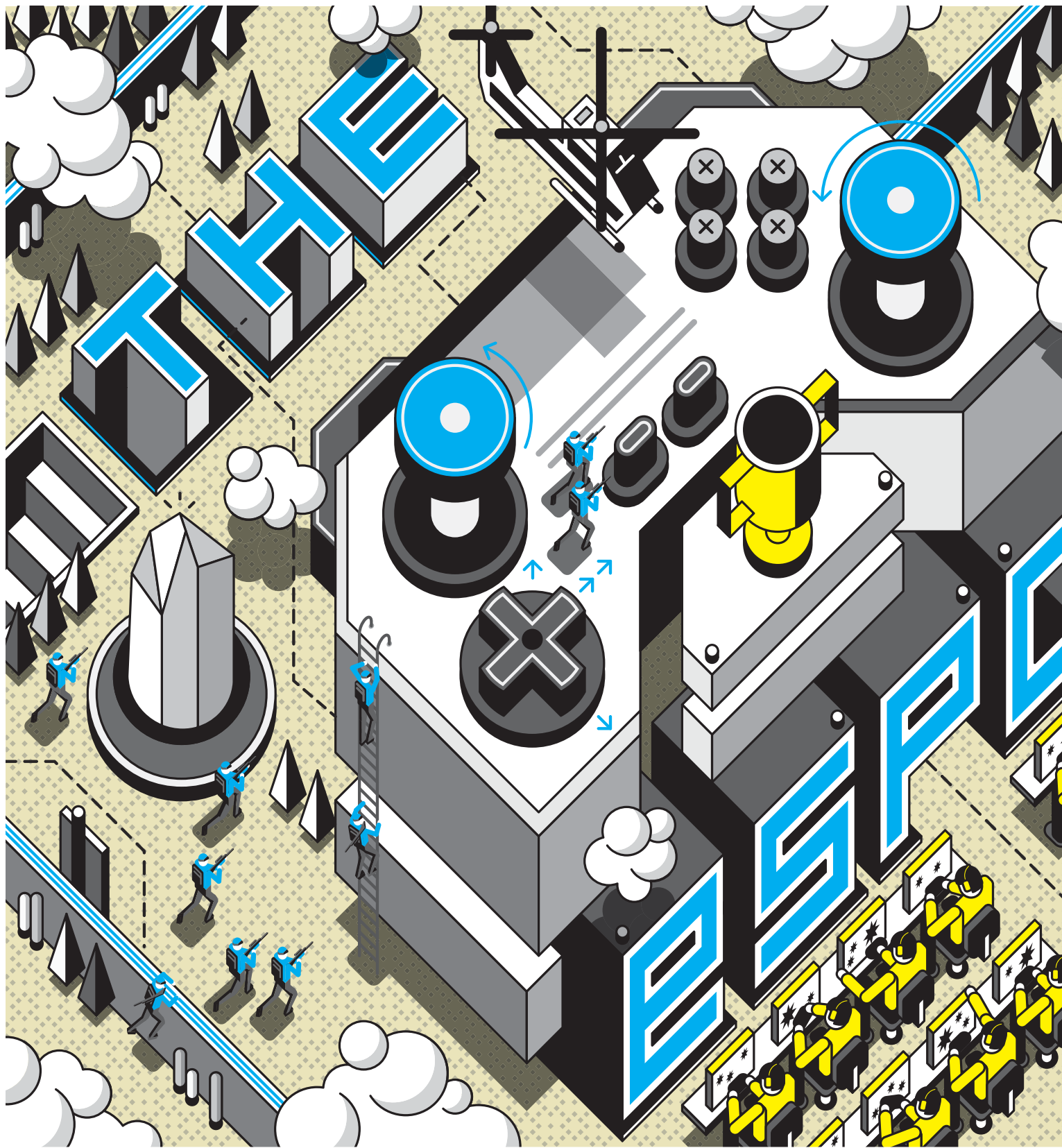
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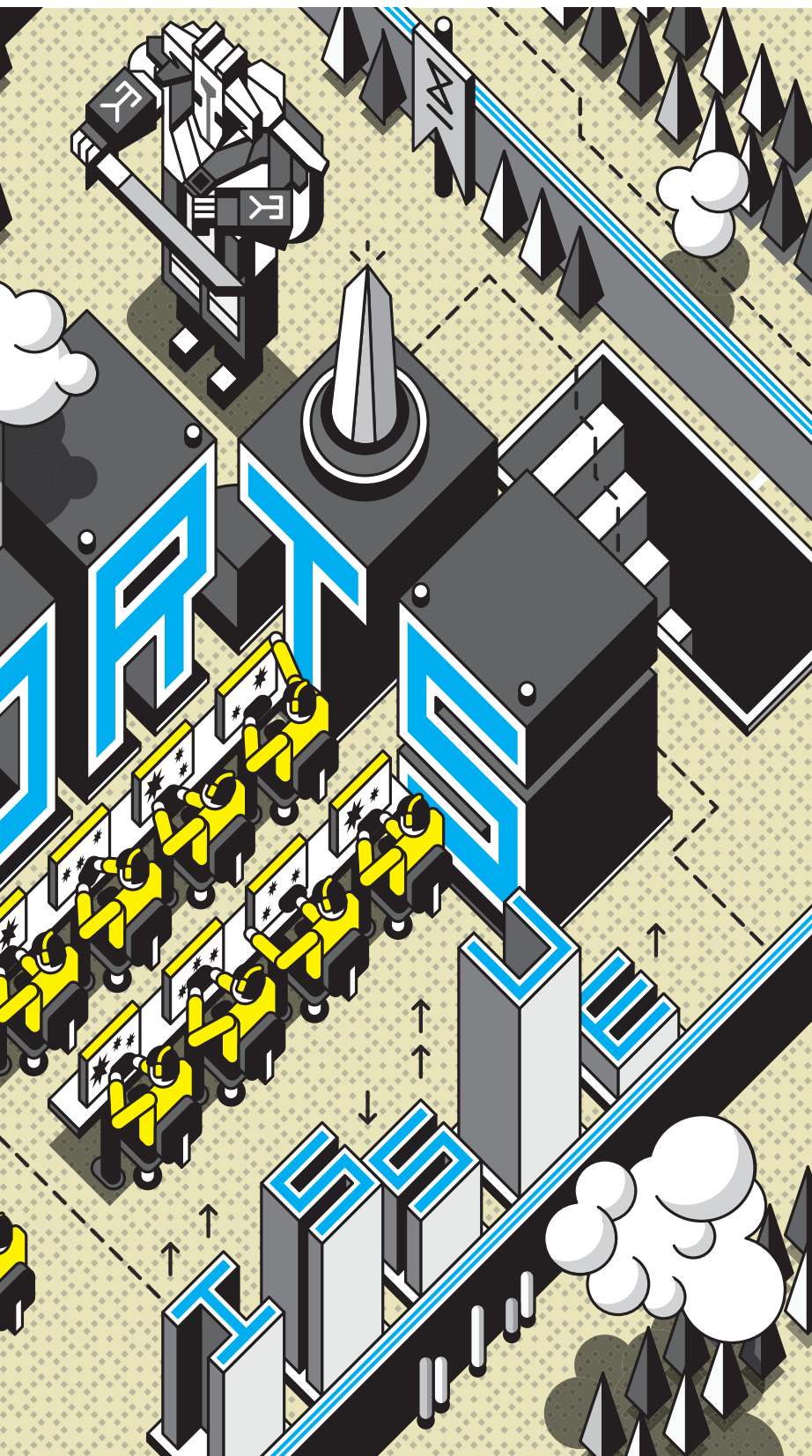
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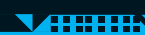
Around the globe, 205 million people watch eSports at least occasionally; 89 million call themselves frequent viewers.



LAST JULY, in the same Seattle arena where Shawn Kemp and Gary Payton became household names, a very different group of athletes reveled in a huge win. Team Newbee waved a Chinese flag, looking dazed as confetti rained down. Their shock was understandable: With their victory at the International, the world's highest-stakes Dota 2 tournament, the Newbee players had just won upward of \$1 million each, the largest prize in eSports history.

The scene was remarkable for how much—and how little—it resembled a traditional championship. Ten thousand screaming fans filled the seats (20 million others had tuned in to the tournament online). They skewed younger and more international than fans at the average NBA or NFL game, and instead of jerseys, many wore elaborate costumes. And as the game progressed, their eyes were locked not on the human competitors but on their fantasy-world counterparts on a massive screen overhead.

For the first time in generations, we're witnessing the birth of a new major sport, and it's happening with unprecedented speed. More than 200 million people call themselves eSports fans; that's 43 million more followers than the NFL can claim. One of the most famous athletes in Asia is a teenage League of Legends star. The site with the fourth-highest peak traffic on the entire Internet is dedicated to gaming live streams. Crack nerd jokes if you like, but it's a gamer's world, and we're just living in it. Welcome to the future.



104,000

Over the course of four days in March, 104,000 people attended the ESL One League of Legends championship in Katowice, Poland, making it the largest eSports event ever.

49

Over the past two years, eSports revenue has grown 49 percent, from \$130 million to \$194 million.





Faker with some of the 30 League of Legends characters, or champions, he plays regularly.

X

eSPORTS

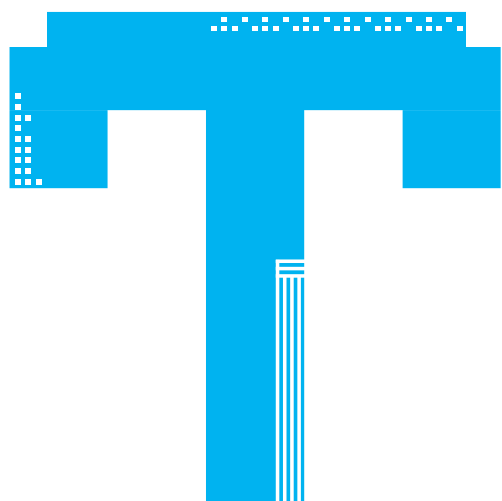
THE UNKILLABLE DEMON KING

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FAKER CAME OUT
OF NOWHERE TO
BECOME THE
FIRST TRUE
GLOBAL STAR OF
GAMING. BUT
CAN THE LEAGUE
OF LEGENDS
PRODIGY CARRY
A NATION ON HIS
SHOULDERS?

BY MINA KIMES
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY
RICHARD ROBERTS

▽

It can be tough to get
Faker to open up about
anything—except
League of Legends.



TWO YEARS AGO, around the time that League of Legends became the most popular computer game in the world, chat rooms from Berlin to Beijing started to buzz about a mysterious Korean known as GoJeonPa who was tearing up the online ranks. No one had heard of him; many assumed he was a professional gamer slumming it in his spare time. Before long, word spread that GoJeonPa was actually a high schooler who lived on the outskirts of Seoul. By the beginning of 2013, he was the top player on the Korean server.

That spring, SK Telecom, one of several Korean companies that sponsor competitive gaming teams, announced it was forming a second League squad and had signed GoJeonPa. The teenager, whose real name was Lee Sang-hyeok, changed his gamer tag to Faker. When he debuted on the professional circuit in April 2013, the online chatter was deafening.

What happened next is now seen as a turning point in League of Legends history.

SK Telecom's first opponents were CJ Blaze, one of the most popular teams in Korea. The match was broadcast on Ongamenet, a cable network devoted to eSports. At the beginning of the game, when the teams selected their characters, or champions, Faker appeared on screen. Reed-thin, with delicate features and an elfin haircut, he

chose Nidalee, a female warrior who can mutate into a cougar.

Because League is a five-on-five game shot from a bird's-eye point of view—unlike first-person shooters like Call of Duty—the game is tailor-made for spectators. As a studio audience looked on, Faker gingerly approached one of his opponents, an older, well-known player named Ambition. Ambition backed under a tower to upgrade one of his abilities, a process that momentarily froze his champion. Then, in a sequence so abrupt I had to pause and rewatch the clip several times, Faker evolved into cougar form, leaped under the tower and executed Ambition. Before the crowd could react, he sprang away.

The camera quickly panned to the bottom of Summoner's Rift, the game's lush, forested map, and found two CJ players squared off against a pair of SK Telecom champions. Faker suddenly came into view. Still in cougar mode, he jumped into the fray and slew one of the CJ players. When the other tried to run away, Faker changed back into human form, hurling a spear that killed his fleeing enemy. In less than 40 seconds, he had assassinated more than half the team.

"My mind is being blown," said Christopher "MonteCristo" Mykles, one of the studio analysts. "I don't know what to say about this." The audience members stared blankly at the screen, mouths agape. They looked as if they had just witnessed a crime.

Over the next 12 months, SK Telecom went on an unprecedented winning streak. In Faker's first season as a pro, the team reached the Korean semifinals. The next season, it went all the way to the world championship. In front of a sold-out crowd at LA's



Staples Center—plus 32 million online viewers—Faker and his teammates swept a Chinese squad to take the Summoner's Cup and a \$1 million prize. After returning home, they continued to steamroll the competition, winning 15 games in a row.

In Seoul, where eSports are more popular with teenagers than baseball, Faker became a household name. He starred in a commercial for SK Telecom, striding toward the camera in slow motion. The Internet birthed a hashtag, #thingsfakerdoes. Some League fans nicknamed him the Unkillable Demon King; others simply referred to him as God. "I think of him on the same level as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods—people who brought their respective industries to the next level," says Jeon Yong Jun, a veteran announcer, or caster. "He was the first true global superstar."



It was perhaps only natural that such a prodigy emerged from Korea, which has dominated the eSports world for more than a decade, churning out gaming wunderkinder the way the Eastern bloc used to produce gymnasts. But no superpower can stay on top forever. Last fall a wave of Korean League stars announced they were leaving the country, lured by huge offers in China. In what became known as the Korean Exodus, two of the best squads, backed by Samsung, were razed, and three SKT starters left. When a Chinese team made a massive offer to Faker—nearly \$1 million, according to some reports—it seemed inevitable that Korea’s reign over League of Legends had come to an end.

Instead, something unexpected happened: The Unkillable Demon King decided to stay.

ONE NIGHT IN April, SK Telecom are playing Samsung Galaxy at Ongamenet’s studio in downtown Seoul. To get to the set, you take a series of escalators through a massive department store, gliding past racks of futuristic beauty products and kimchi refrigerators as you ascend to the roof. Just outside

the studio’s doors, a young nurse named Kim Han Sol is standing in 4-inch heels, wearing a leather skirt and a black flat-brim that says **FAKER** in all caps. “He’s the most impactful player,” she says, absentmindedly stroking one of her thick pigtails as if petting a cat. Kim vividly remembers Faker’s first game, against CJ Blaze. “I was very happy. There were a lot of expectations, and he fulfilled them all.”

After Faker won back-to-back MVP awards in 2013 and 2014, his supremacy was indisputable. But last spring, SKT started losing—and backlash began to foment. Headlines on eSports websites asked whether the team’s empire had fallen; forums exploded into arguments over whether the 18-year-old star was past his prime. Although most League experts pinned the squad’s decline on Faker’s teammates, by the end of 2014, when



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Even warming up in Florida for Riot's biggest League tournament of the spring, Faker says he doesn't get nervous.

SKT lost in the playoffs, everyone agreed: God had come back to earth. In October, another Korean team, Samsung Galaxy White, hoisted the championship cup.

When I walk into OGN's studio, I'm struck by how closely it resembles a game show set. Teams play in glass booths that face the crowd, and two sets of announcers—Koreans and English speakers, dressed in checkered blazers and ties—sit between them, in front of a giant screen displaying the game. OGN's head producer, Crisis Wi, says the channel is the country's most popular cable network among males in their teens and 20s. A recent match drew 500,000 viewers online.

After a slow start this year, SKT bring a hot streak to the match tonight. If the team wins the spring finals in a few weeks, it'll advance to the Mid-Season Invitational in Tallahassee, Florida, where it'll face victors from other regions. (The world championship is slated for October.) Meanwhile, the Samsung team, which was gutted by the Korean Exodus, has lost eight of its past nine matches. About an hour before the game, the team's new players trudge into their booth, keyboards in hand. Clad in white leather jackets, with matching black glasses and feathery bangs, they look like the world's least intimidating motorcycle gang.

As I watch from the back of the set, Erik "DoA" Lonnquist, the American play-by-play announcer, walks by and spots Faker behind the stage. "There he is," he says, pointing. "The man, the myth, the legend. The tiny Korean kid." Sensing a rare opportunity to speak to God alone, I hustle across the set. It's warm in

the studio, but Faker is wearing a red SK Telecom parka. At 5-foot-8 and 119 pounds, his frame barely fills out the uniform; his cheekbones are so sharp, they cast shadows across his face. He tells my translator he's about to head backstage to get his makeup done. The network slathers the players in luminous foundation, which makes them look like bloodless extras in a vampire movie. I ask Faker whether he hates it, and he says no. "My skin is not so good," he says.

When the Buff Girl, who hypes up the audience before games, skips by and says hello, Faker blushes. (In League, to "buff" a character is to increase its powers.) I try another question: Is he afraid of losing? "I don't get nervous anymore," he replies. One of his managers suddenly appears. She asks my translator whether we're discussing SK Telecom's strategy. Before he can say no, Faker is gone.

Because Samsung are so weak, the SKT team doesn't even play its star tonight; it subs in his backup, Easyhoon. In recent weeks, there have been rumblings online that Easyhoon—bespectacled, with sloping bangs and a melancholy expression—is just as good as God. "Faker is better overall," DoA says when I pose the question to him later. "But the argument can be made that Easyhoon is as useful." Two rows behind me, I see Kim, the nurse, coloring in a sign with a marker. It says: EASYHOON IS DREAMY.

When the game begins, it quickly becomes obvious that Samsung are overmatched. In League, the teams spawn from opposite corners on the map, and the main objective is to



TOP PRIZE

Faker's career winnings, which are separate from his team salary.

\$29

destroy the opponent's castle, or nexus. Along the way, champions harvest gold and power by slaying neutral creatures, accruing weapons and taking out their enemies. At its highest level, League is a deeply tactical game, but it's easy for neophytes to enjoy. Kills are good. Multiple kills are better. SKT easily win both games.

After the match, a few dozen fans wait outside the studio for autographs. Most of them are women, with similar hairstyles (bangs) and outfits (baggy sweaters with short skirts and heels). One girl is wearing a white hamster onesie; as she kneels down to pick up a box of chocolate cream cookies, a gift for the team, her fuzzy tail drags between her legs. When fans approach Faker, bearing chestnuts and stuffed animals and gifts wrapped in pastel tissue paper, he bows. He carefully places their presents in a pile, then holds their phones out for selfies, tilting them just so. One girl hands him a metallic pen and asks him to sign an autograph book, and he writes FAKER in all caps. He pauses, then adds: *haengbok hasaeyo*. Be happy.

A FEW DAYS later, I turn onto a side street in Seoul's Gangnam District, following a sign that says O2 PC BANG. Down several flights of steps, I enter a dark, windowless room furnished with rows of computers. An older woman sits near the door, next to a display of energy drinks.



The café is silent except for League's telltale sound effects (coins tinkling, weapons firing). Near the back of the room, three Korean men sit shoulder to shoulder, tapping at their keyboards. One of them, a 27-year-old named Kim Hyun-jun, says he comes here a couple of times a week, usually for five hours at a time.

When I ask him whether he's heard of Faker, he looks at me as if I've sprouted a third eye. "Of course," he replies, while his friends snicker. "Everyone knows him. Faker is God."

Korea has more than 12,000 PC *bangs*, many of which are open 24 hours a day. They started cropping up in the late 1990s, when the Asian financial crisis spurred the government to invest in broadband. According to OGN's Wi, the recession helped spawn the Korean eSports craze. "The unemployment rate went up, and there was a huge amount of people looking for things to do," he says. "So they started playing video games." Today it seems counterintuitive that in a country where young children carry smartphones that aren't yet available in the West, people still flock to old-fashioned Internet cafés. But there are sociological reasons for their persistence. In Seoul, where many families live in small apartments, kids are less likely to play shooter games in their living rooms. Instead, they escape to PC bangs.

The first eSports to sweep the country was StarCraft, a real-time strategy game that's as complicated as chess. StarCraft was released in 1998; by the middle of the next

decade, Korea boasted a thriving professional league, a regulatory agency (the Korean eSports Association, or KeSPA) and two cable networks dedicated to gaming. But at the end of the decade, StarCraft was losing steam—just in time for Riot Games, a small company based in Santa Monica, California, to bring League of Legends to market. Riot doesn't break out user numbers by country, but more than 12 million people play the game every day. When professional teams started to form in Korea in 2012, an advanced infrastructure of coaches, sponsors and training houses was already in place.

Faker lives with his teammates in an apartment on the fringes of Seoul, in an area populated by half-empty office buildings. The players share bedrooms. When they wake up around noon, a cook comes in and prepares lunch. Afterward, they walk a few minutes to their training center. For the next eight hours, they practice by scrimmaging against other teams, occasionally taking breaks to study game film. Faker usually practices by himself for at least four more hours.

When I visit the facility, SKT's coaches, Choi "L.i.E.S." Byoung-hoon and Kim "kkOma" Jeong-gyun, are in their shared office, sitting side by side in matching leather chairs. I ask kkOma, who is playing League at his computer, what he thinks of the Korean Exodus. "It depends on the results of this year's championship," he says, one hand rapidly clicking on a mouse, eyes locked onto the screen. "If Korea wins, it isn't a problem. If another region wins, maybe there is."

When I mention Faker, kkOma furrows his brow. "It's a team game," he says. "When the team doesn't do well, Faker doesn't do well. He looks

as good as he does because there's a baseline set by the rest of the team."

Outside the coaches' office, God himself stands in the hall, gazing at a picture of the 2013 roster posing with the Summoner's Cup in Los Angeles, the players beaming as they point a finger to the sky. I ask him whether he's still in touch with the players who left Korea, and he says no. "I'm busy practicing."

Faker grew up in the Gangseo District, not far from the SKT training center. He and his younger brother were raised by his father (he says he hasn't seen his mother in a while) and his grandparents. From an early age, he was an autodidact, the kind of kid who solved Rubik's Cubes and read foreign books to teach himself new languages. His father, a carpenter, was slightly bewildered by his precocious son. Sang-hyeok always loved games—learning them, practicing them, conquering them. He discovered League when it launched in Korea in 2011, and he started playing it around the clock; before long, he was so good the Korean server struggled to match him with players of equivalent skill. When SKT approached him, he had just started high school. After joining the team, he dropped out.

Faker shows me the computer room where he practices, then leads me to a lounge furnished with a massive leather sectional, a shelf of trophies and a rack of sneakers from New Balance, one of SKT's sponsors. A cooler is stocked with sports drinks provided by another sponsor, Pocari Sweat. The sofa is big enough for sprawling, but Faker perches on the edge, his hands clasped together. When I ask him to describe his life at the training center, he paints an



FAKER, LEAGUE MASTER

724

WINNING PERCENTAGE [142-54]

1,046

CAREER KILLS [NO. 5 ALL TIME]

5.4

KILLS PER MATCH, TIED FOR NO. 1 ALL TIME*

*MINIMUM 100 APPEARANCES

ascetic picture. He has no real hobbies outside of gaming, and he's never had a girlfriend. The walls of his room are blank. He likes water.

I tell him I've read that he owns a couple of plants and ask him what they look like. "There's a tree-ish one and a grass-ish one," he replies. He pats the tufts of hair above his temples, a recurring tic.

Initially, SKT's coaches were put off by Faker's shyness. One was even worried he might have a speech disorder—some days, he uttered only a few words. "He didn't talk very much, so we had reservations about whether he would be good in a team environment," Choi says.

But when Faker talks about League, he visibly relaxes. I ask him how he can play so many champions—while most gamers have mastered a few characters, he's played more than 30 at the professional level—and his eyes light up. "My strength is in understanding the flow of the game, when to fight and when not to fight," he explains. "Regardless of which champion I play, that strength is there." As he recounts his professional career, details trickle out. At the 2013 world championship in Los Angeles, his team took him to Universal Studios; he smiles broadly when he recounts the Transformers ride. Sometimes, he opens his practice sessions to fans and plays American pop music in the background. His favorite artist is Taylor Swift.

He admits that fame perplexes him. League fans on Naver, a Korean Internet portal, track his every move. A recent Reddit post ruminating on whether he was flirting with a Korean television presenter drew

hundreds of comments. When he makes a rare trip outside SKT's training center, he's often recognized by teenage admirers. "I usually wear a baseball cap," he says.

Faker doesn't like to talk about the offer from China. When I bring it up, his mouth twists a little and he rubs his hair again. "A lot of players who left say it's been difficult," he finally says. "I think going abroad is a good experience, but personally, I want to stay in Korea and win the world championship again." I ask him whether he believes he's the best player in the world. "Not yet," he says. "There are a lot of people on my level now. I think if I practice hard, I will indisputably be the best again."

DoA AND MONTECRISTO, the American casters, both live in Kyunglidan, a trendy neighborhood with narrow streets lined with jewel-box-sized cafés and craft breweries. We meet there for lunch—*jaeyook bokeum*, or stir-fried pork belly—with Susie Kim, a translator and former StarCraft caster. When I ask the group why Faker is regarded as the

best player in the world, MonteCristo, who goes by Monte, jumps in: "How would you grade a professional athlete? Like, what makes LeBron great?"

I rattle off a few words: athleticism, skill, decision-making.

"It's the same. It's exactly the same," Susie says.

The League equivalent of athleticism is called mechanics, which refers to a player's ability to use his mouse and keyboard to make swift movements, like dodging shots. In this respect, Monte says, Faker is peerless. He points me to a video of what is widely seen as the greatest play in League history, clipped from a 2013 game between SK Telecom and the KT Bullets. Faker is dueling another player, Ryu, and they're both playing the same champion, a ninja named Zed. After a brief skirmish, Faker's Zed appears about to die, so he darts away. Then, just when Ryu thinks he has the fight sewn up, Faker unleashes a startling set of moves, cutting down his opponent in a blinding flash. The audience goes nuts. "He used six different abilities in the span of two seconds," Monte says.

Even more impressive, DoA adds, is the breadth of Faker's champion pool, which makes it easier for him to adapt to new patches to the game—the "meta," in eSports parlance. Because Riot upgrades League every few weeks, players live in perpetual fear of having their favorite champions' skills diminished. Imagine if the NFL suddenly announced next year that rushing touchdowns were worth only five points, or if MLB expanded the strike zone for left-handed pitchers. Although the constantly changing meta keeps the game fresh, it can be

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That's one of the reasons the average eSports career is so short. Professional players typically retire before their mid-20s; like figure skaters, they peak long before then. Older gamers must battle slowing reflexes and fatigue, as well as injuries to their necks and wrists. "As a male teenager, it's easy to play video games for 16 hours," Monte says.

Because many Korean players skip college, their career options after retiring are limited. "A lot of pro gamers don't come from wealthy backgrounds," Susie says. "A good number of them are doing this because they're supporting their families." Increasingly, she says, players realize they have limited time to capitalize on their skills, which is driving some of them to leave the country. Although most professional gamers in Korea earn five-digit salaries and a few elite players make over \$100,000 (Monte says Faker probably makes more than twice that; SK Telecom declined to comment on his salary), Chinese teams boast massive war chests. One squad, Invictus Gaming, is owned by the son of Wang Jianlin, the richest man in mainland China. This winter, Invictus added four Korean players to their roster.

Pro players also make money by streaming, allowing fans to watch them practice while advertisements pop up. One retired player in China, Wei "Caomei" Han-Dong, has said he makes more than \$800,000 a year streaming. Korean teams have

begun to stream a little, but in general, "they think it's inefficient," says Lee "CloudTemplar" Hyun-woo, a retired-gamer-turned-caster. "In Korea, to make money you have to put up results." Demand is out there, though. This February, a minor scandal flared up when a Twitch user started streaming Faker's practice games without permission.

Riot Games' Korean headquarters is located near Sinsa Station, a hotbed for plastic surgery. The airy office boasts the usual Silicon Valley trappings: arcade games, a Lego table, even a drum set. League is free to play, but Riot makes money—\$1.3 billion last year, according to SuperData Research—by charging for cheap in-game features such as skins or custom kits for champions. Many of these add-ons become popular

after professional players use them.

To stem the flight of Korean players, Riot and KeSPA, the league's regulator, have enacted a few changes. Last fall Riot instituted a new region-locking system that restricts Western teams from recruiting too many foreigners. Richard Kwon, Riot's Korean communications chief, hopes to persuade the government to grant reprieves from mandatory military service to successful eSports athletes, as it did for MLB star Shin-Soo Choo. Yet he insists the Korean Exodus is



At a match in Seoul, Faker gets his makeup done before appearing in front of adoring fans.

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Double Fantasy

VULCUN'S ALI MOIZ SAYS FANTASY eSPORTS COULD BE A \$250M INDUSTRY BY 2020.

It was, perhaps, inevitable. Draft sites Vulcun and AlphaDraft offer fantasy eSports competition under a format similar to other fantasy games: You select a team, which earns you points based on its actions (such as kills and assists). AlphaDraft, which says it aims to have 1 million players on the site by the end of 2015, will pay out at least \$5 million to fantasy players this year; Vulcun has set aside a prize pool of \$10 million. And those numbers are poised to continue growing: Gamers around the world watched an average of 16 billion minutes of live eSports gaming streams last year. "Fantasy eSports will grow with the industry," says Ali Moiz, founder of Vulcun. Adds AlphaDraft CEO Todd Peterson: "We have learned a lot from fantasy sports, such as the fact that daily fantasy matches are much more popular than weekly matches." So ask yourselves this, gamers: What is Faker worth to you? —JOHN GAUDIOSI

overblown. "What's different about the Korean scene is there's a very strong amateur scene," he says. "We can find and raise new talent easily."

Another Riot Games staffer jokes: "Faker Two."

Korean workplaces are famed for their emphasis on collectivism. No individual is greater than the group, and no quality matters more than unity. "Teams will say, 'If a player can't handle the amount of pay he's getting, we'll just send him off,'" CloudTemplar says. "We can start fresh with a new player." Korean players aren't naturally gifted at video games, he says—they're just better trained, with superior coaches. "That's probably our greatest strength," he says. But what happens, I ask, when the coaches start to leave?

"We'll just have to put in even more effort," he says.

SKT'S FINAL MATCH of the spring is against the GE Tigers, a team that beat them earlier in the season. Both have already qualified for the playoffs; tonight they're playing for pride. Before the studio opens, I meet Faker's father, Lee Kyung-joon, and two aunts at a coffee shop near OGN's set. As soon as we begin talking, one of the aunts grasps my arm. "He is the pride of our family," she says.

When SK Telecom first approached Kyung-joon about signing his son, he was wary of pulling the boy from school. But a teacher convinced him that Faker could easily earn a degree later. "As a single parent, it's my role to support my son," he says. "He's doing this because he wants to." When SKT won the world championship, Kyung-joon was blown away

by the response. "I started thinking, 'Wow—he's really good at this,'" he says. "He's worked very hard. He's giving it his all."

I ask him whether the rumors about China's lavish offer were exaggerated, and he hesitates, just as Faker did. Finally, he shakes his head: It happened. But why would anyone turn that down? "He wanted to stay with SKT," he says. "I feel it's good to show loyalty to the organization that brought you up."

Before the match begins, Faker is sitting inside SKT's booth, practicing with a teammate. When Faker plays League, the hand that rests on his mouse barely moves, but his tendons are constantly pulsating, rising and falling like strings on a guitar. One of his feet bounces up and down. As he navigates the map, I watch him closely, trying to identify what makes him so great—trying to connect the corporeal presence in front of me with the lethal killing machine on the screen. But nothing jumps out. He looks like a normal boy, albeit an unusually focused one, playing video games with a friend. Eventually, he leaves to get his makeup done.

At the beginning of every match,

there's a phase called the draft in which each team picks five champions and bans three from the map. Because each character has a unique set of skills, drafting is a pivotal part of the game: Monte tells me at least 30 percent of winning depends on roster composition. Faker excels at a number of champions, but he's never lost a game while playing LeBlanc, a vampy female assassin. Unsurprisingly, GE ban her immediately.

SKT easily take the first game, but the second match lasts longer, the teams trading blows for about 30 minutes. At one point, a GE player tries to jump Faker from a hiding place, a move called ganking. When Faker dodges the attack, the crowd bursts into applause. Eventually, all five GE players bump into four members of SKT; sensing an advantage, they initiate a fight. After SKT hold their ground for a few seconds, Faker suddenly bursts onto the screen, driving a wedge into the fracas. SKT win the battle, and before GE's champions can re-spawn, SKT destroy their nexus. Game over.

Afterward, one of the Korean presenters interviews Faker, who perches on a stool next to her, his creamy makeup melting under the spotlight. She asks him what it's like being the face of SKT.

"I hope that we can gift them with more wins and prestigious titles," he says.

"Do you have anything to say to your fans?" she asks.

He sneaks a glance at the crowd. "In the second game, we made a lot of mistakes. I feel regretful."

There's a concept in Korea called *mangshin*, which roughly translates to "losing face"—bringing shame to your community. "Say a team in the States doesn't perform well," says Will "Chobra" Cho, a Korean caster. "You'll criticize them, but you'll still have a parade. In Korea, it's



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like, 'You didn't do well? Don't even think about coming back.'" For example, he says, after the Korean team lost in the 2014 FIFA World Cup, fans went to the airport to throw toffee at the players. (They meant it as an insult.)

Some League stars have admitted that after leaving Korea, they felt unburdened. One of the best players in the world, Kim "Deft" Hyuk-kyu, left Samsung to join China's Edward Gaming last year. Deft says Chinese fans are less critical. "In Korea, the fans are *gong-gyuk*," he says, using a phrase that means "to attack."

In 2012, a Korean player named Jang "Woong" Gun-woong glanced at the screen behind him during a match, which is forbidden in professional play. His team was immediately punished, and League fans ripped into him online. A year later, he retired, then wrote about the incident on Reddit. "I was criticized as [a] traitor of the country," he wrote. "I was 22 years old back then; I had no idea what I have to do." The online hatred was so unbearable, he wrote, he checked into a psychiatric hospital.

Woong, now 25, lives with his parents in Mok-dong, just south of the Han River. Over a cup of lemongrass tea, he tells me he quit gaming for a number of reasons. The fans, he says, were "pretty vicious"—but he also felt his skills were on the wane. "I don't like change very much, and the game was changing," Woong says. He tried coaching after retiring, but it didn't work out, so he returned home to work part time at his father's business. Soon, he plans on enlisting in the military. "For most pro gamers, the future isn't very bright," he says. "It's hard to make a career after retiring."

I ask him if he still plays League for fun. "Not often," he says. "Maybe once every two days."

BY THE TIME the Mid-Season Invitational arrives in May, the debate over whom SKT should start—Faker or Easyhoon—has ballooned into a full-blown controversy. After thrashing GE in the Korean finals, the team brings both players to Tallahassee for MSI. Deft, whose team easily won the Chinese league, tells a reporter from a Riot website that he sees Easyhoon as a greater threat. "Faker is really good at making plays that change the game," he says. "But the current meta doesn't really allow that to happen."

The tournament takes place on Florida State's basketball court in front of a sellout crowd of 4,000. The stands are roiling with young people, teenage boys and girls—so many girls!—and cosplayers dressed up in elaborate costumes, PVC-and-felt simulacra of characters. When I spot a roving pack of muscle-bound bros in tank tops wearing backward FSU hats, I assume they're lost—until I notice one of them is carrying a sign that says NERF IRELIA, a hyper-specific joke about a League champion. They are all pumping their fists.

The great paradox of eSports is that even though games are played online, competition is still bound by physical constraints. If an American player tries to log on to the Korean server, for example, she'll encounter slight delays. Because teams must battle on common ground, foreign rivals meet only at international tournaments. American and European squads generally have not fared well.

Most of the fans in Tallahassee are rooting for America's representatives, Team SoloMid. They get clobbered. SKT skate through to the semifinals, where they face a European squad, Fnatic. Everyone assumes the Koreans will win, but the series is surprisingly close—at one point, Faker dies multiple times.

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As a crowd of 4,000 looked on in Florida, Faker ended up fighting for his team and his spot.

After an announcer wonders aloud whether SKT should consider replacing him with Easyhoon, several people in the crowd roar with assent. The next night, when the teams walk onto the stage for the finals—Edward Gaming in black satin jackets embroidered with dragons, SKT in navy and white—Faker is conspicuously absent. SKT have decided to start Easyhoon.

The Koreans take the first game, but the next match is a struggle; Deft, the expat, scores multiple kills. SKT lose the second and third games. Now facing elimination, the team heads backstage, followed by a camera broadcasting back into the arena. As the players gather in a huddle around kkOma, a murmur of recognition ripples through the crowd: Easyhoon isn't there. He's been subbed out. The fans rise to their feet, chanting Faker's name.

When he walks onto the stage, the entire arena erupts.

Once the game begins, SKT play with a renewed sense of purpose.

The team starts winning fights and harvesting points, building up strength as Faker stalks the center of the map. "There's just a different aura coming out of SKT," one announcer says. The team easily wins, and the series goes to a fifth and final match. This time, in the draft phase, EDG players make a foolish mistake: They don't ban LeBlanc.

Soon, though, it becomes clear the move wasn't an error—it was a trap. EDG have assembled a roster specifically designed to attack LeBlanc, and with Faker largely neutralized, the EDG players begin roaming the map in a murderous pack. As they rack up kill after kill, the odds swing in their favor. Finally, after 37 minutes, the Chinese team destroys SKT's nexus, and a voice thunders from a nearby loudspeaker: "For the first time that I can remember ... a Korean team has fallen." Silver confetti drizzles over the stage, and SKT disappear.

Afterward, as I look for Faker backstage, I find myself thinking

about a question I asked him back in Korea: What are you going to do when this is over? Over the course of a few weeks, I brought this up with about a dozen gamers, and most were stumped. Several admitted they hadn't thought about their future. Others said they'd enter the Korean military and figure it out later. The only person who answered quickly was Faker, which was surprising, given his usual reserve. "I want to study," he said. He hasn't settled on a subject, but he likes science. He loved the movie *Interstellar*. As I search the arena, I remember his response, and I wonder whether he does too.

Eventually, I catch sight of him outside, lined up with his team on a makeshift red carpet in front of a paper background. Hundreds of fans are gathered in the warm Florida night, waiting to take their picture with SKT. They come forward, one by one, genuflecting before God. Every time, he bows and smiles back. **E**

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RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

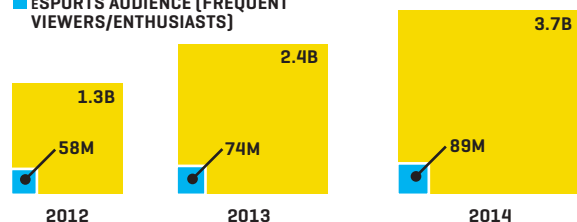


There's a formula for stories like this one: Open with a stadium full of screaming fans. Zoom in on the contestants, sweating from the intensity of the competition. Then comes the incredulous reveal: This isn't basketball or boxing or even billiards. It's eSports—and the "athletes" are headset-wearing, energy-drink-guzzling gamers. But enough of all that! More than 20 years after the first video game tournaments, top eSports tourneys now draw audiences that rival the biggest traditional sporting events; popular midweek live streams routinely attract more than 100,000 online viewers. Coke and Nissan have joined Logitech and Red Bull as tournament sponsors. Gaming is what every traditional sports league is desperate to become: young, global, digital and increasingly diverse. So can it ever be a *sport*? Does it matter? eSports are here. They're real. They're growing. And we have the numbers to prove it. —BEN CASSELMAN, FIVETHIRTYEIGHT.COM

GLOBAL DOMINATION

So how big is this gaming thing? Let's start with this: Some 205 million people watched or played eSports in 2014, according to market research firm Newzoo—meaning that if the eSports nation were actually a nation, it would be the fifth largest in the world. [They're coming for you next, Indonesia!] And while eSports have long been biggest in Asia, especially gaming-mad Korea, North America and Europe now claim 28 million eSports fans—and the number is growing by 21 percent a year.

■ TIME SPENT WATCHING eSPORTS WORLDWIDE (IN HOURS)
■ eSPORTS AUDIENCE (FREQUENT VIEWERS/ENTHUSIASTS)



TWITCH

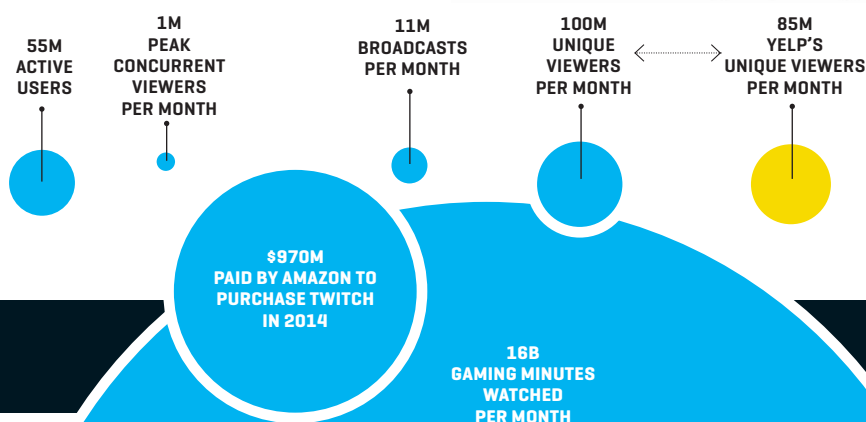
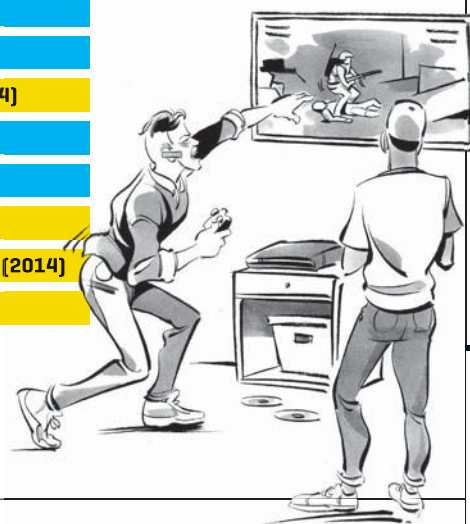
Twitch, a video-streaming site that boasts 55 million users, is arguably the most important contributor to eSports' recent growth. Offering streams of games and tourneys and access to gaming's stars, it's also where the next generation of would-be gamers post their own streams. And apparently someone's watching.

FIRST-PLACE PRIZES*

\$10M	World Series of Poker champ (2014)
\$5.1M	Super Bowl champion (2015)
\$5M	Dota 2—the International 4 winner (2014)
\$4.1M	NBA Finals champion (2014)
\$3.8M	Stanley Cup champion (2014)
\$1.3M	Smite World Championship (2015)
\$1M	League of Legends World Championship (2014)
\$0.4M	Call of Duty Championship (2015)

The takeaway here: If you can't tell the difference between a flush and a straight and the NFL just ain't in the cards, be a gamer!

*PER TEAM, EXCEPT IN INDIVIDUAL CONTESTS

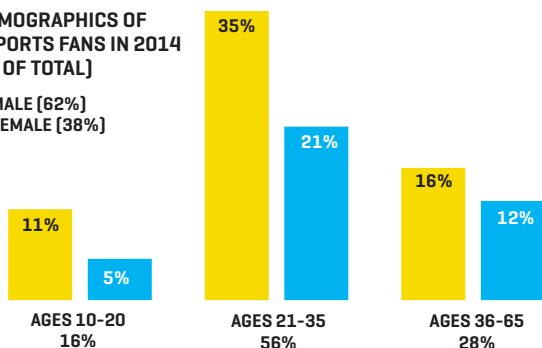


DEMOGRAPHICS

The gamer stereotype? Young, single, male ... and living in some sort of basement. In actuality, according to Newzoo, more than half of American eSports fans are employed full time, 44 percent are parents and, perhaps most surprising, 38 percent are women (another study puts it at 44 percent). One part of the stereotype does ring true, though: eSports fans *do* tend to be young. Just 28 percent are over 35—which, of course, is a selling point to advertisers looking to reach the next generation of consumers.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF eSPORTS FANS IN 2014 (% OF TOTAL)

MALE (62%)
FEMALE (38%)



2014 CHAMPIONSHIP VIEWERS

When Major League Gaming launched in the early 2000s, its tournaments played out in hotel ballrooms before ... dozens of fans. Today, eSports' biggest tournaments rival practically any sporting event. The League of Legends Championship sold out Staples Center in 2013, then sold out the 40,000-seat World Cup Stadium in Seoul a year later while drawing an online audience of 27 million—more than the TV viewership for the final round of the Masters.



Super Bowl	112.2M
League of Legends	27M
Masters	25M
Dota 2—the International	20M
NBA Finals	15.5M
World Series	13.8M
Stanley Cup finals	5M



TOP 5 eSPORTS EARNERS IN 2014

Chen Zhihao [aka Hao]

\$1,112,281

Wang Jiao [aka Banana]

\$1,112,281

Wang Zhaohui [aka Sansheng]

\$1,098,069

Zhang Pan [aka Mu]

\$1,098,069

Zhang Ning [aka xiao8]

\$1,032,370

Mamas, *do* let your babies grow up to be eGamers. These five, all members of team Newbee, totaled \$5.03M for winning the 2014 Dota 2 title. The prize pool has increased by more than 580 percent since 2012.



“WE DON’T REALLY NEED PEOPLE OVER 40. THEY’RE STILL WATCHING BASEBALL AND FOOTBALL.” MIKE SEPSO, PRESIDENT OF MAJOR LEAGUE GAMING

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PRESENTED WITHOUT COMMENT: AS AN OVERALL CATEGORY, GAMING HAS MORE YOUTUBE FOLLOWERS THAN NEWS, MOVIES AND EDUCATION COMBINED.



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3. Sports 78M
4. News 35M
5. Popular 28M
6. Spotlight 22M
7. Movies 18M
8. TV shows 12M
9. Education 10M

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY CARL CARCHIA

“THE WHOLE GAME IS BEAST MODE”

THINK **MARSHAWN LYNCH** IS TOUGH TO BRING DOWN ON THE FIELD? WAIT UNTIL YOU RUN INTO HIS CHARACTER IN CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III. GOOD LUCK, GAMERS.

○ BY SAM ALIPOUR

✕ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ART STREIBER

eSPORTS

A game-ready Lynch, in a mo-cap suit, at the Activision studios in LA.



IN THE YEAR 2065,

cybernetic advancements give rise to augmented human soldiers, a new breed of badass charged with preserving our way of life. Their mission leads them to a seedy bar in Singapore, where they encounter an underworld boss and his elite squad of mercenaries. Among them is a 5-foot-11, 215-pound battering ram of a man who's exactly like the world's most ferocious running back circa 2015: the Seahawks' Marshawn Lynch.

Welcome to the world of Call of Duty: Black Ops III, the highly anticipated first-person shooter game set for release in early November. What follows is the exclusive behind-the-scenes story of how Lynch put his stamp on the blockbuster franchise. The game has long captured his imagination. Now it will carry his likeness, giving him the distinction of being the first athlete to appear as a character in a Call of Duty game.

So strap on your helmets. Here comes virtual Beast Mode.

11 A.M. ACTIVISION MOTION CAPTURE STUDIO, LOS ANGELES

Lynch's gold teeth glisten through his grin as he arrives to begin the motion capture process that created Gollum. "Really glad to be here," he says, offering his hand to executives from publisher Activision and developer Treyarch. The feeling is mutual. "For Marshawn's role, we needed an imposing figure," says Mark Lamia, Treyarch studio head. "When we learned he's a huge fan, we thought it'd be awesome to have him inside our game."

Lynch says his COD fandom was sparked during his college days at Cal. The nine-year NFL veteran now logs on daily for battles with teammates old and new, because "it's a cool way to keep in contact," he says. "It's a fun-loving way to let off some stress." As a bonus, the game aligns with Lynch's on-field philosophy. "You're shooting up everything but always fighting for a bigger picture. The whole game is Beast Mode."

11:15 A.M. LIGHT STAGE

Lynch takes a seat at the center of a cocoon-shaped light stage where 16 cameras will capture a 360-degree image of his skin texture and features. "This looks scary," he says, before grilling the shadowy figures who line a row of monitors. "How many lights you got on here?" (6,280 LEDs.) "You counting them little s--- too?" (Yes, even the little lights.) "Is this healthy?" (Sure, Kevin Spacey went through the same process for his role in Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare.) "Who? The dude from *The Jetsons*? The spaceman?" (No, the dude from *House of Cards*.) "That's a show? What they do?" (Politics.) One last question. "Can y'all make me an app right quick?"

11:35 A.M. CYBERWARE SCANNER

"Am I gonna leave this thing with brain damage, or is this gonna make me smart?" Lynch asks. More like option C: The mechanical arms rotating around Lynch's head are capturing 3-D mesh data of his skull and facial muscles, which, when



125+

DUTY CALLS

Since 2010, Call of Duty has been played by 125 million gamers for 17.4 billion hours. During that time, more than 100 billion Call of Duty multiplayer matches have been played.

wrapped with the skin data, produces a complete down-to-the-pore representation of his head. “Y’all trying to kill me,” he says.

11:50 A.M. REFERENCE PHOTOGRAPHY

Standing atop a circular platform, the now-shirtless running back is spun around as a photographer shoots him from every conceivable angle. Later, animators will refer to the images as they add art to the running back’s 3-D model. Lynch believes his digital doppelgänger must be a dish of three key ingredients: “He better have dreads, gold teeth and my distinctive walk. Then people will be like, ‘Oh, that’s really Beast Mode right there!’”

12:30 P.M. SCENE PREP AND REHEARSAL

Those same people would flip if they could see Lynch dancing in his mo-cap suit at the center of this 60-by-30 stage as 62 cameras feed to a monitor and display his movements in real time. Lynch, meanwhile, is baffled by his grayscale rendering, which makes it appear as though he’s naked. “What the hell is this?! Am I playing a stripper?”

Not quite. Director Adam Rosas walks his cast through the bar scene. Lynch will lead his fellow guns-for-hire—played by veteran mo-cap performers Jeremy Dunn and Ben Jenkins—to a table for booze and

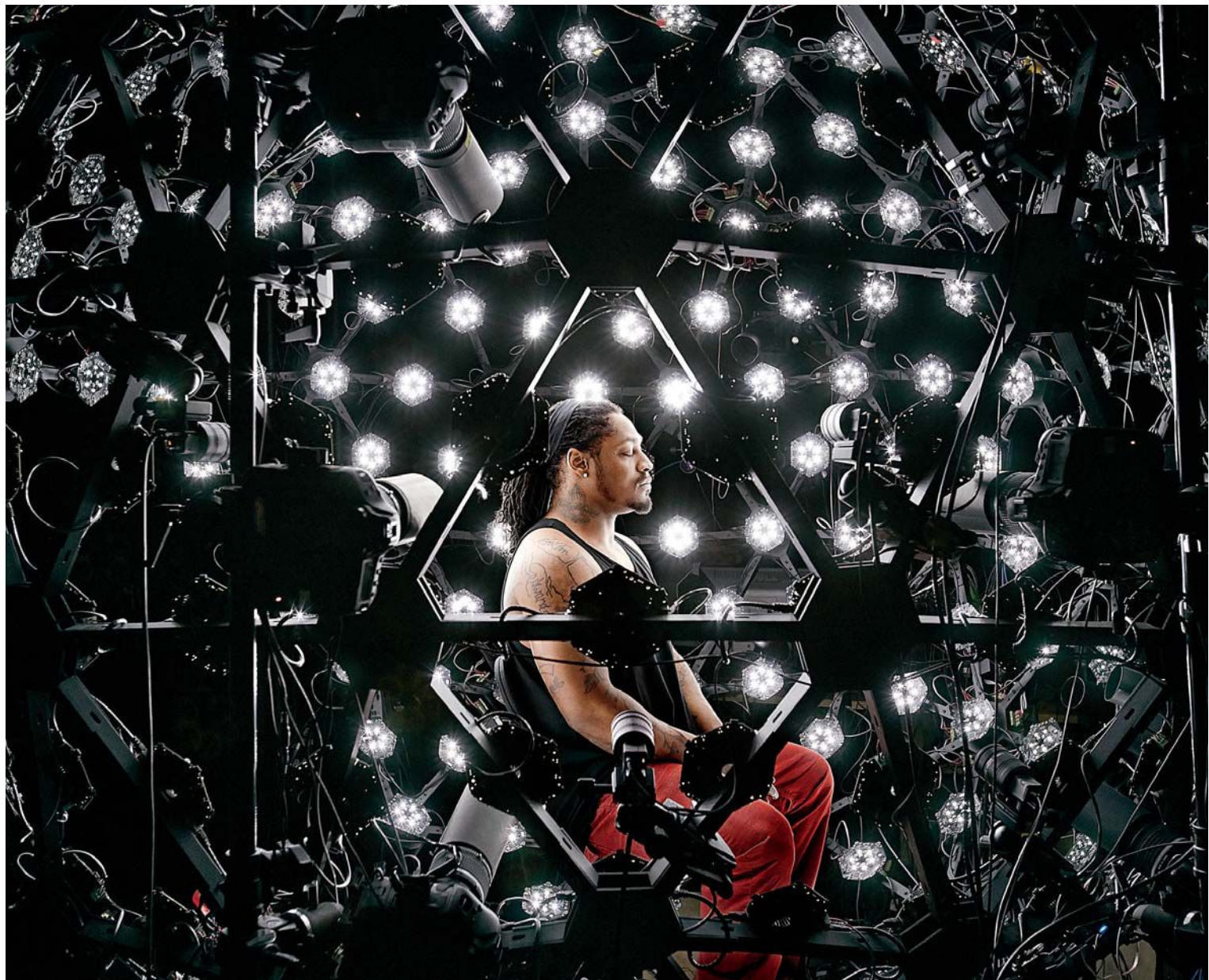
1 Lynch gets his face scanned, capturing 3-D data of his features.

2 He likes what he sees! Lynch watches playback of his digital self.

3 With plastic pistols, Lynch dials up the drama during his mo-cap run.

4 Feast mode: Lynch eagerly watches a Black Ops III preview.





banter. The bosses will enter. A melee will erupt. They'll shoot up the tavern and flee to the streets of Singapore.

"So I'm a villain," Lynch says gleefully.

A stagehand arms Lynch with two handguns and a rifle, all made of blue plastic. Then Lamia, the studio head, lobs a warning: Mo-cap acting, he says, requires imagination. Unlike on a movie set, Lynch must make do without production design, props or written dialogue. In fact, Lynch will be ad-libbing his lines, which won't be recorded today but could be added later in postproduction.

Inside the ultimate photo booth, 16 cameras lit by 6,280 LEDs capture Lynch's face in 360 degrees.

"This is hard," Lamia says. "You really have to act."

"I got you, boss," Lynch replies.

12:45 P.M. FILMING ON MO-CAP STAGE

Action! Lynch beckons his men to the table. "I'll show you how a playa live!" he says. Once seated, he pantomimes smoking from a hookah. He coughs. He swigs his imaginary beer. He burps. He turns to the actor with the funny accent. "Where you from again?" he asks Jenkins. "England," the Brit replies. "Y'all got good grass in England?" Lynch asks.

"We got football," Jenkins says.

"F--- football," Lynch counters.

"I'm talking about that good grass!" Rosas cuts through the laughter with direction: "The bosses walk in! Get up. Aim now. Move forward to intimidate. And fire!"

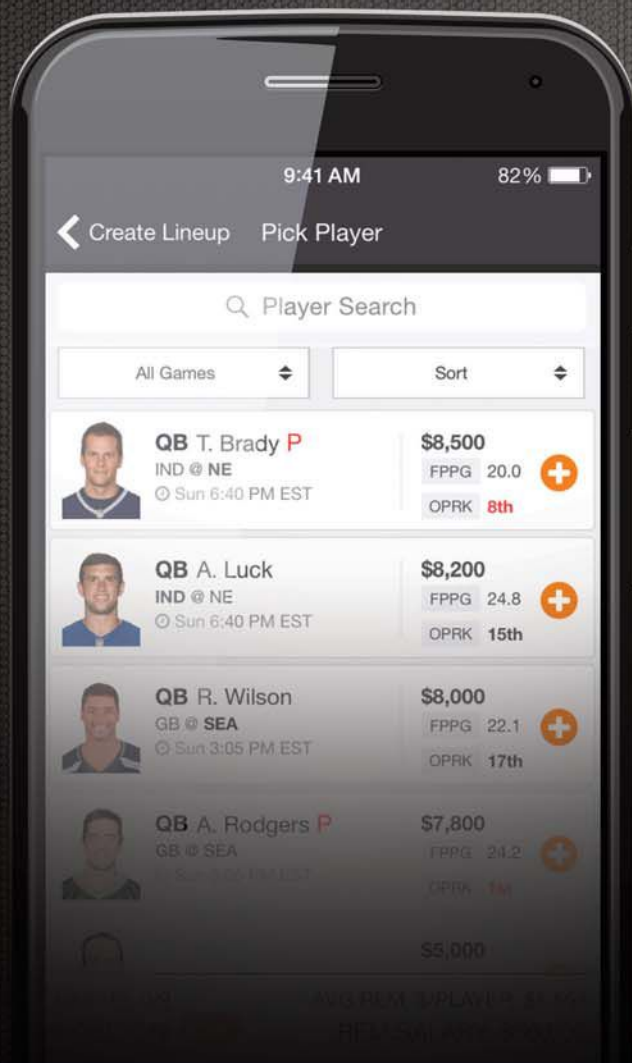
The actors let fly a barrage of make-believe bullets before sprinting offstage. And cut! "That was brilliant!" Rosas cries. "You're a one-take wonder!"

"On my way out here, I was nervous," Lynch says. "Now I'm fittin' to join the Army!"



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TWO-WAY STARS

LYNCH ISN'T THE ONLY ATHLETE LIVING OUT HIS GAMER DREAMS. HERE ARE THREE MORE VIRTUAL ALL-STARS WHO CAN'T PUT DOWN THEIR CONTROLLERS.

2:45 P.M. SCREENING AT TREYARCH STUDIOS, SANTA MONICA

Lynch's immersion into Black Ops III continues with a classified theatrical presentation of the game. Toting a Cup Noodles, he takes his seat in the media room as the film unspools on a big screen. When it fades to black, all eyes turn to the fanboy. A spoon of noodles is frozen to his chin. One, two ... five seconds of stunned silence. Then: "Hell yeah!" The COD honchos let out an audible sigh of relief.

Then Lamia hits his guest with a sledgehammer. "Would you like to play the game now?"

3:15 P.M. HANDS-ON DEMO

Game on! Seated before a monitor for a six-on-six battle, Lynch feverishly works his sticks alongside 11 in-house game testers, digital assassins who know Black Ops III's every wrinkle. But Lynch isn't fazed. He stays true to his Beast Mode running style, or as he puts it, "I'm shooting the s--- outta s---!"

Problem is, Lynch can't find quality engagements. His team wins, but he knows the pros pulled their hits. "Don't be doin' that, man!" he barks at the testers. "Show me what you got!"

Rematch! This time, the pros play through the whistle. Again, Lynch's boys win. "Marshawn Lynch is the perfect match for Call of Duty," says Eric Hirshberg, CEO of Activision. "I mean, he's a guy who fills stadiums, crushes competitors and has a Beast Mode. What could be more COD than that?" But this player isn't ready to hang up his fatigues. Lynch texts several "cousins," summoning them to Treyarch for more gaming.

7 P.M. GAME OVER

When the monitors go dark on Lynch's crew, COD's No. 1 fan offers his spoiler-heavy five-star review of the game. Then Lynch takes a moment to reflect. "I've been in the Super Bowl, movies, music videos, Madden. But to have your own character in Duty is, I mean, it's almost like you arrived."

But the gamer is conflicted. Digital Lynch will be a formidable foe, no doubt. Leaving nothing to chance, he slides his email address to a map designer. "I need some cheat codes, feel me?" ■

KEVIN DURANT

FORWARD OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

I never took it for granted that every copy of NBA 2K15 was going to have my face on it. 2K was a source for me to dream big as a kid; I felt like I was a part of the NBA by playing the game. And now, as a pro, it lets me enjoy being a kid again. I play the MyPark mode more than anything else now, but not as myself. I saw Kyrie Irving playing in there one time, and he had like a million people following him around. I was like, "Nah, I want to keep it low-key and play with my homeboys." I've told people who I was before, and a couple of guys didn't believe me until I followed them on Instagram. Word does get around the park, though. It's like our own little community.

CHRIS KLUTE

DEFENDER COLUMBUS CREW SC

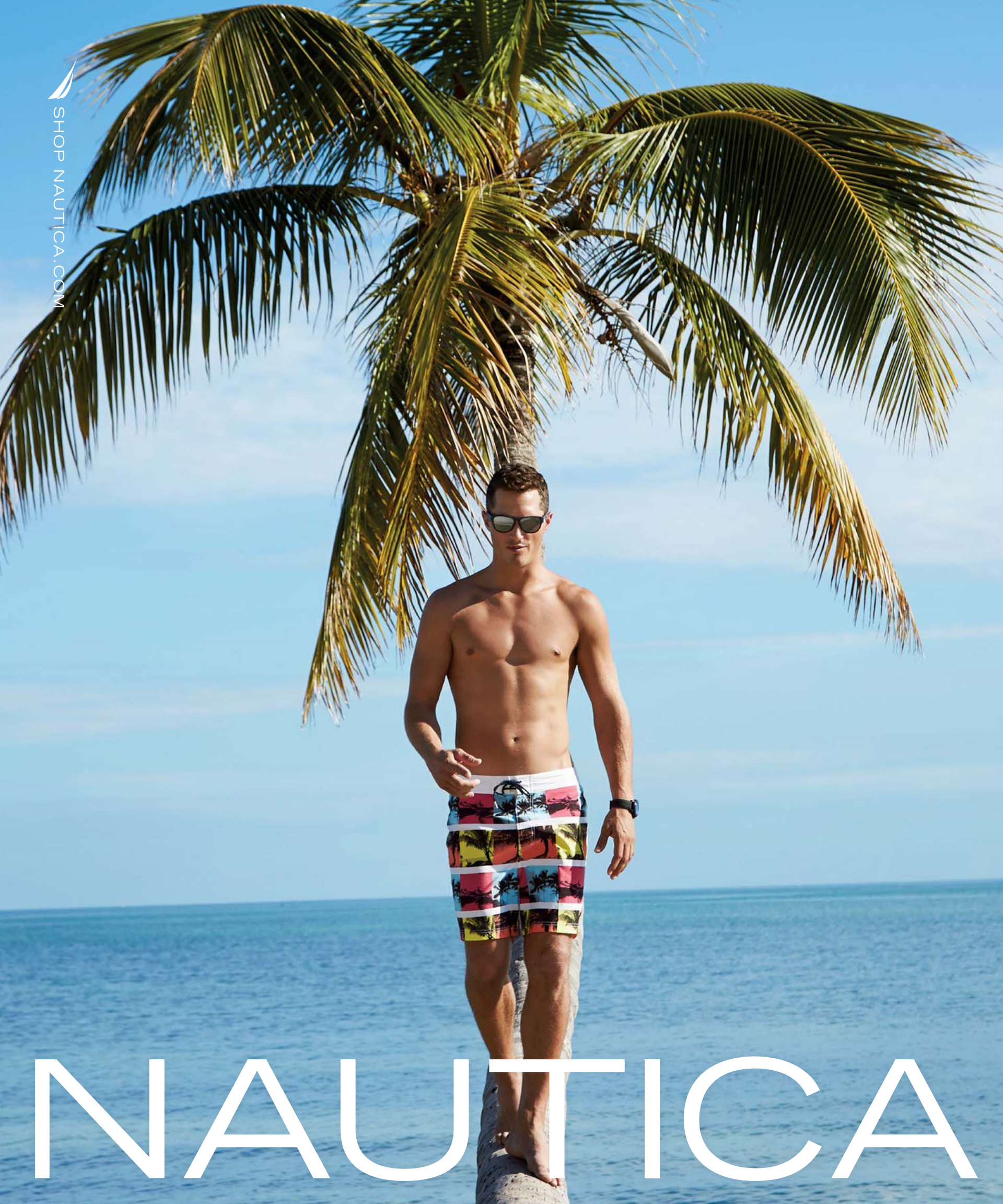
I went to Furman University for a year and a half and studied computer science because I loved video games. I plan on continuing that as I get further into my career. I'm playing Smite and Destiny a lot, and one of my favorite games is Metal Gear Solid. Of course, I also play FIFA often. We have it in our locker room, and there's always a good competition going on. There are so many things you can look at on the screen and put into play in real life—movement off the ball, angles when going to the goal, shooting, positioning. It's all a form of mental study. Even when you're dribbling, you can start doing tricks, and eventually you want to try that in real life.

PATRICK PETERSON

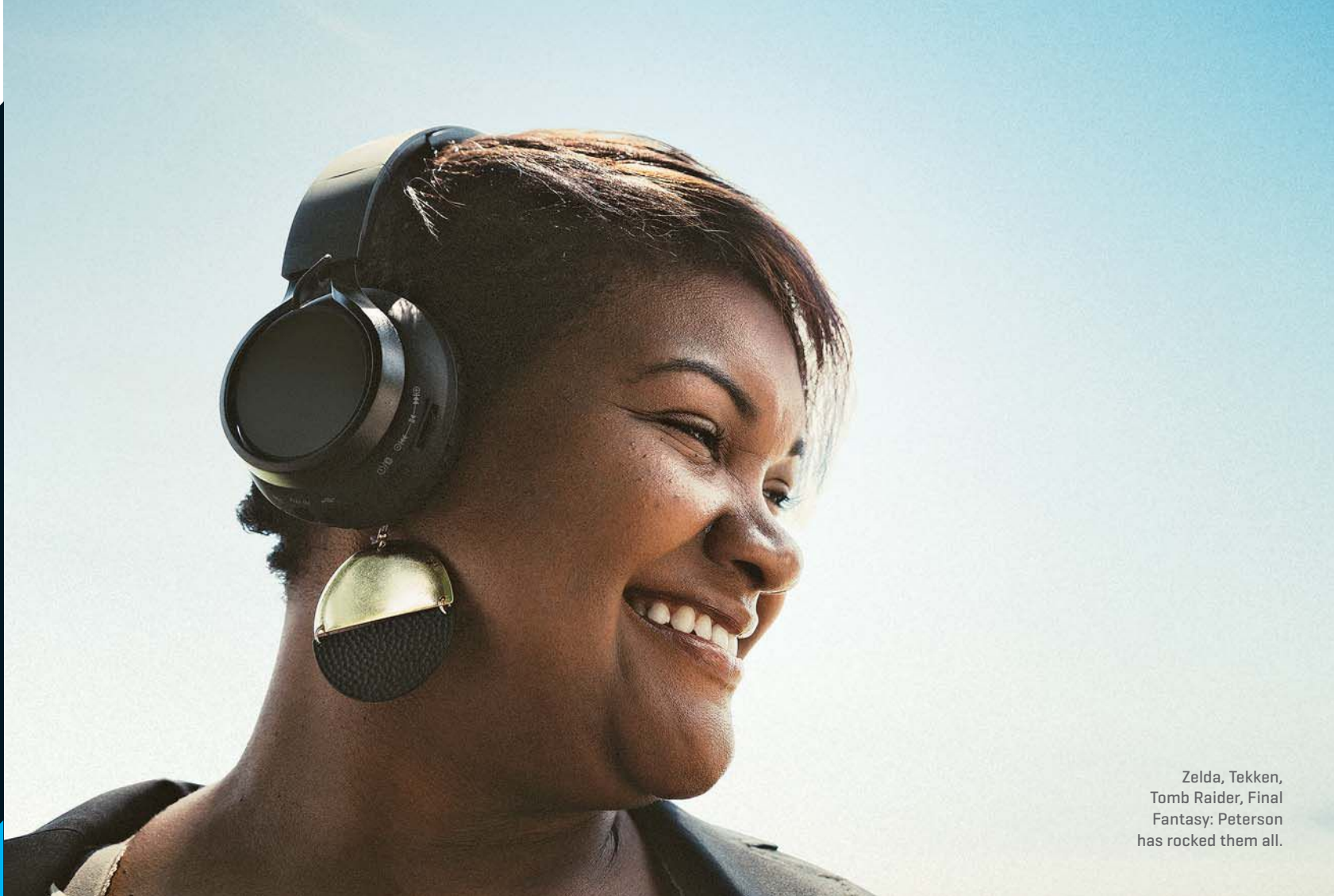
CORNERBACK ARIZONA CARDINALS

I've been playing Madden for as long as I can remember. As kids, we had a championship belt that we played for in neighborhood tournaments. The champ would keep it for three months, and then there would be a new tournament. I only had it twice. I'm definitely better at Madden now. I'm strategizing as if I were the head coach. I was still surprised I won the Madden Bowl back in January. I hadn't played this year's version much, and the tournament was played on Xbox—I don't even own that system! But I went out and played cover 2 defense, blitzed a couple of times and ran the ball almost every single play. That's my strategy: Run the ball and play great defense.

—AS TOLD TO JORDAN BRENNER



NAUTICA



Zelda, Tekken,
Tomb Raider, Final
Fantasy: Peterson
has rocked them all.

THE LEGENDARY ADVENTURES OF A FEARLESS GIRL GAMER

IT'S HARD ENOUGH FOR **WOMEN IN GAMING** WITHOUT THE CONSTANT THREAT OF HARASSMENT, OR WORSE. BUT THAT WON'T STOP US FROM PLAYING, EVER.

× BY LATOYA PETERSON

IT WASN'T ALWAYS scary to be a woman who played video games. For a while, it was normal. There were always girls racking up high scores in arcades or dominating the console or the computer at home. But now, as the conversation around games has shifted from play toward the high stakes of online harassment, people keep asking me, with sincerity, "Why do women even *bother* to game?"

I started gaming back in 1989, when the gorgeous gold-cartridged Zelda beckoned from my father's (totally forbidden) Nintendo Entertainment System. By 1991, every other 8-year-old black girl I knew was kick and crossing to Another Bad Creation's ode to Iesha, a Nintendo-playing playground cutie. It was our anthem. Endless rounds of Donkey Kong Country, Tekken 2 and Abe's Oddysee made up my youth. My cousin and I even got into fistfights playing Doom because he insisted on playing that creepy-ass game with the lights off.

By the time I was a teenager, most girls were feeling the pressure to give up gaming for more "feminine" pursuits. But I never felt discouraged from playing. If anything, the guys hovering by Marvel vs. Capcom 2 were thrilled to see women breaking up the dudefest. No one messed with *anything* that put girls in the gaming matrix.

Flash forward. At 31, I'm a dedicated console player and madly in love with my RPG machine, also known as a



GIRL POWER

Forty-four percent of all gamers are women. If that's not enough to blow your mind, that's almost triple boys under 18, who make up about 15 percent of the market.

PlayStation. But even though I'm not so off from the average gamer, who is 35 years old and nearly as likely to be female (44 percent) as male, according to the Entertainment Software Association, no one looks at me these days and thinks "gamer." Nobody.

Not the trolls trying to lock the clubhouse door, not the mainstream media that occasionally cover the sexy gang of competitive girl gamers formerly known as the Frag Dolls. If you listen to the prevailing narrative, the average gamer is an aggressive young white guy with every single system and a LAN hookup. Everyone else is an outsider.

It's a narrative reinforced by GamerGate, a loosely focused Twitter movement that purportedly began as an ethics movement in gaming journalism but is best known for its vile harassment campaign against women, who are seen as enemies to the community. Death threats. Rape threats. Doxing. The environment can be toxic. As one game developer wrote in *The Escapist*: "Knowing that speaking out gets you on the harassment radar makes it easy to quit a line of work that's already challenging." And the media, ever fearful of video game violence and ignorant of gamer culture, seized on GamerGate as the cause célèbre—*Law & Order SVU* even ripped it from the headlines.

Still, it's strange to me that at this moment in history, when *more* women are playing than ever, when casual and mobile games are rampant, when video games are our cultural touchstones, *now* people think I should be scared away by the angry boys in the machine. GamerGate gets to be *the defining issue in gaming culture*? You have got to be kidding me.

Gaming isn't perfect, not by a long shot. There's still so far to go toward representation and equality both in-world and behind the scenes. But judging the entire culture of video games through the singular lens of online harassment is a lot like saying "Hollywood's full of sexist pigs—how can you watch movies?" That doesn't mean the harassment isn't real—it just means we play anyway. Gaming is my home, and I know a lot of other women who feel the same way. To crib a line from the Notorious B.I.G.: *Just the way players play, all day every day. I don't know what else to say.*

WOMEN KNOW BETTER than anyone that video games aren't a pure art form; developers and designers work in a business in which the market (and its stereotypes) dictate what games look like. If society says women don't (or won't) play, then games featuring women don't get made.

And still, we play. In fact, women 18 and over (33 percent) outnumber males under 18 (15 percent) among gamers. So let's dispel the myth that women are drawn only to titles like *Animal Crossing*, *Candy Crush* and *The Sims*. Fun games, but women are also kicking ass on puzzles like *Portal*, rail games like *Rez* and, of course, first-person shooters. Let's also abandon the notion that we hate playing as men—the *power* of gaming is that you get to step into someone else's skin. Hell, sometimes we do it just to get a character with clothes.

In 1996, women in gaming finally found a kindred spirit in Lara Croft. An adventure-seeking archaeologist, she could kick your ass and still make a proper cup of tea. I will always have a spot in my heart for Lara Croft—most feminist gamers do. In her games, Croft is her own person, strong and complicated; outside of the game, in the eyes and hands of others, she faces the same sexualization we all do. (Who can forget the 2001 cover of *Next Generation Magazine*, with hands holding a censored sign over Croft's breasts in homage to Janet Jackson?)

Croft was never a chump, not then and not now. In the

final battle of *Tomb Raider II*, faced with scores of masked marauders in a home invasion, Croft, wearing just a robe, takes them out with a shotgun. The game's closing scene finds Croft ready to enter the shower. She turns to the camera, breaking the fourth wall, and purrs, "Don't you think you've seen enough?" before firing her shotgun into the camera. An iconic ending that continues to signal to me that women in games (virtual or not) don't owe anything to anyone.

Granted, I didn't have to grow up in today's hyperconnected gaming environment, in which the online harassment of women feels like it will never stop. But girls these days are also given even more opportunities to play and exposure to coding—the chance to show that they too can rock the controller like a boss and later make their own games.

Recently, I had dinner with an old friend, and we talked about how much our lives had changed since we first started playing together 10 years ago. We used to spend hours poring over new releases and online videos. Now gaming is something we squeeze into the crush of dealing with aging parents, toddlers, health issues, marriages and work drama.

But still, the familiar longing takes over me every time I see a new trailer online for *Final Fantasy XV* or hear about the new characters in *Tekken 7*. I know I should be spending my time elsewhere—bonding with my family, in the gym, learning to code, being with my friends. So with all the people warning me that talking about games will lead to nothing but pain and drama, why do I still play at all?

The answer is simple: Sometimes, you just need to feel epic. ■



After winning \$1.5M in 2014, Evil Geniuses were the favorites going into the MLG event, but Team Empire pulled the upset.



IN THE HOUSE OF HEROES

Seven miles from the heart of downtown Columbus, Ohio—just beyond Sandy's Used Tires and swaths of unmowed fields—sits a wholly unremarkable office building. But step inside. The drab exterior gives way to a thumping red-and-blue-spotlit discotheque, with a boisterous crowd milling—and waiting. “We’ll be back with more Dota 2 after this!” scream-announces the emcee.

A cheer erupts. Welcome to MLG.tv Columbus Arena, Major League Gaming’s 14,000-square-foot venue, the first and only dedicated to eSports in North America. On this mid-April weekend, more than 700 fans have gathered for the three-day joinDota MLG Pro League LAN Finals. Six five-person teams, representing 15 countries, have squared off in Dota 2, one of the world’s biggest battle arena games. The days are long, the stakes are high—the total prize pool cashes in at \$86,461. So strap in, because there is, in fact, much more Dota 2 after this.

✕ **BY HALLIE GROSSMAN**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN LOOMIS



GAME FACE

Sumail Hassan Syed (gamer name: "Suma1l") moved from Pakistan to Chicago last year, then quickly earned a spot on Evil Geniuses, one of the winningest Dota 2 squads. At 16, Boy Wonder, as one fan christens Hassan [above], is the team's youngest player. "Peak age tends to be 20 to 22," says MLG president Mike Sepso. So EG's 27-year-old Clinton "Fear" Loomis is Dota 2's grizzled vet—down to his nagging tendinitis.



CASTING CALL

William "Blitz" Lee [above right], the color commentator for the event and live stream alongside play-by-play announcer Toby "TobiWan" Dawson, didn't own a suit at the event's outset, so he dashed to the local Nordstrom on the first day for a wardrobe upgrade. Lee, a former gamer, is still making the transition to his new role. "Whenever I cast a game, I want to play," he says. "It makes me itch for it."



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Will Abreu [above right] and Devin Shepherd man the control room, where the live stream feeds to 1 million at-home Dota 2 viewers in 217 countries. The nearby players lounge is equally international: The Balkan Bears, with members from Germany, Jordan, Bahrain and Romania, met for the first time in Ohio; Ninjas in Pyjamas, fan favorites in Sweden, boast a merchandise line that features chocolate bars and potato chips.

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Go Further



WATCH PARTY

The tourney draws diehards like Regan [1 and 2], who's in "hero," or game character, garb she crafts herself. She's not alone in hero worship: David Hendricks [5] stocks up on Dota 2 plush characters, and Adam Stackpole [4] totes his Demon Edge sword—signed by gamers and casters—to all Dota 2 events. His friends Nate Rees [3] and Keith Dahlstein [6] attend unarmed.



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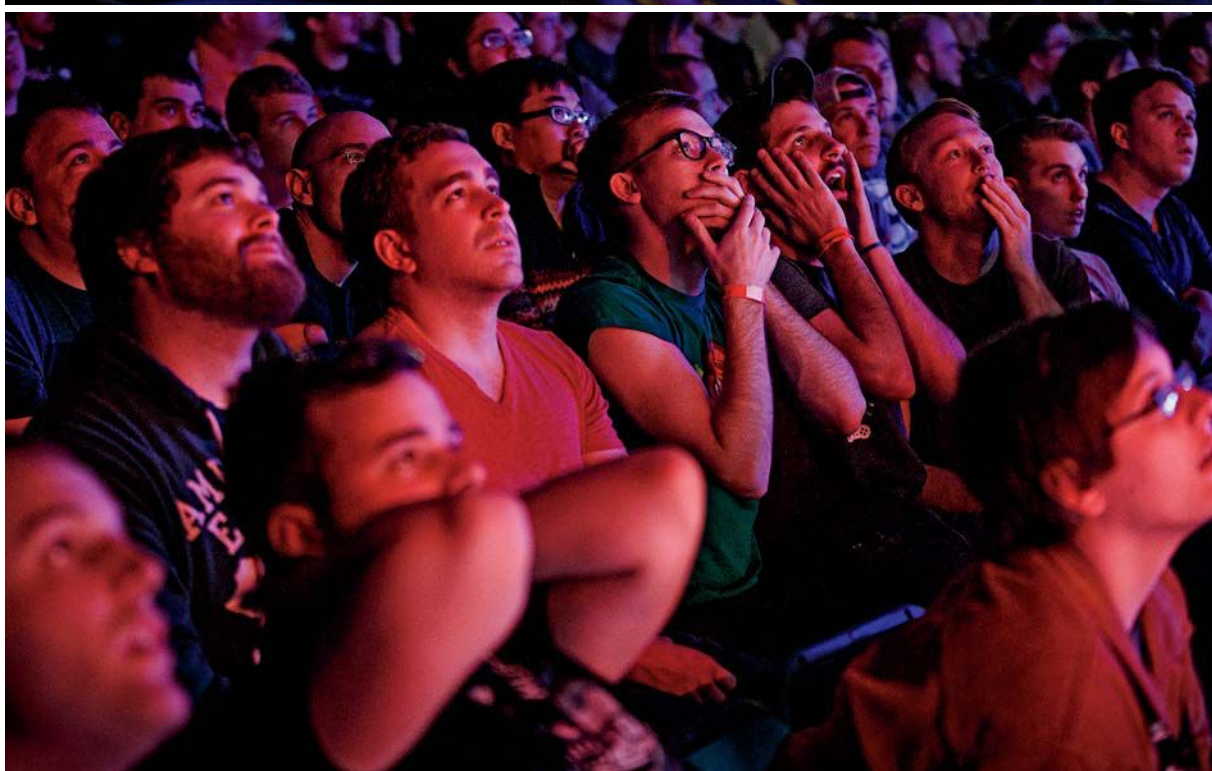
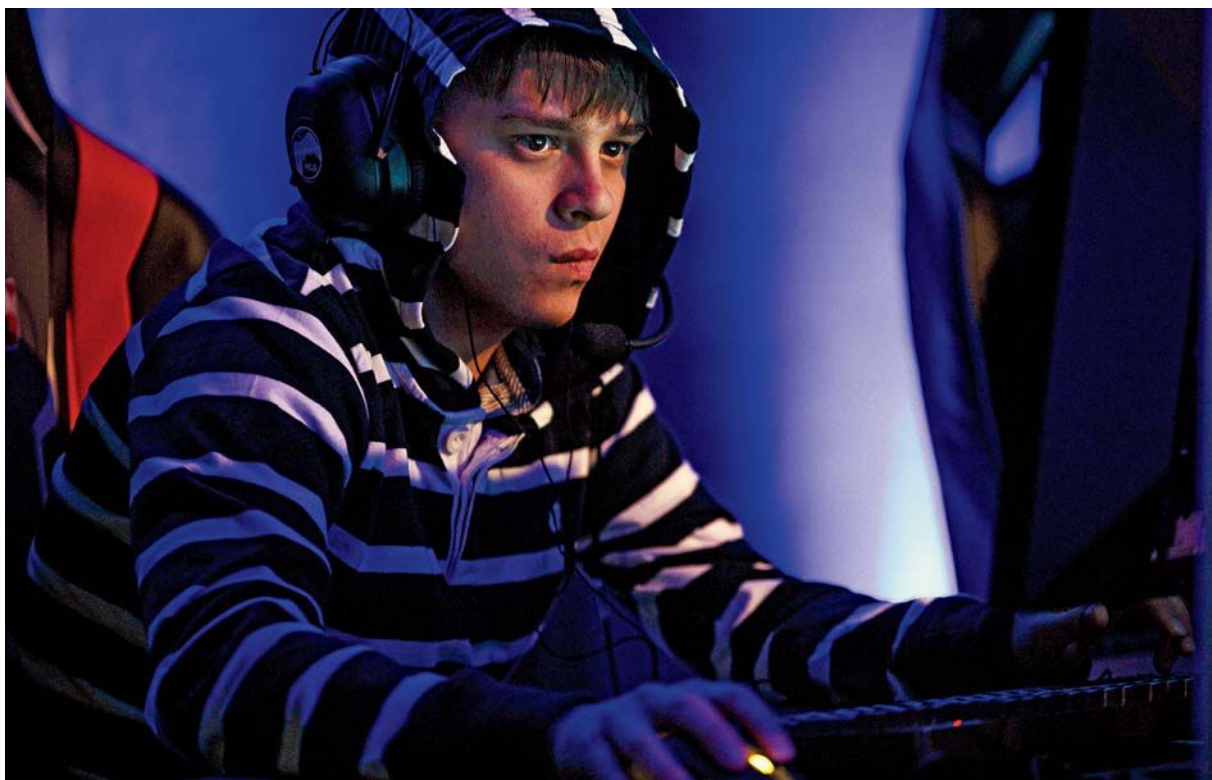


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TEAM EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

About a week before they left for Columbus, Team Empire, from Russia, found out that one member's visa had been denied. Enter Ukrainian Gleb "Funn1k" Lipatnikov (top), an emergency stand-in who has played with Empire in the past. Luckily, according to William Lee, "Funn1k is as talented as they come." Indeed, Empire's Hail Mary isn't just the right move, it's the winning move: Empire upset Evil Geniuses in the best-of-three final on the last day. "We got stomped in the third game," EG captain Peter "ppd" Dager says. "[Funn1k] was the perfect stand-in." Or at least perfect enough to help bring home the \$34,584 first-place haul. Now, *that's* hero ball.

DOTA 2: BY THE NUMBERS

20

The sequel to Defense of the Ancients, Dota 2 boasts 20 million players worldwide, making it the second-largest multiplayer online battle arena game. League of Legends is No. 1.

11

The \$11 million prize pool at the 2014 International 4—the Super Bowl of the Dota 2 world—is the largest purse to date in all of eSports.

57

In 57 countries across the world last year, there were 105 "pubstomps," or viewing parties in bars, for the International 4 Grand Finals, organized by the makers of Dota 2.

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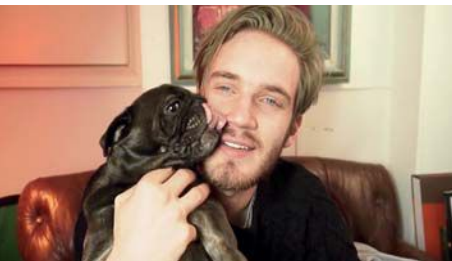


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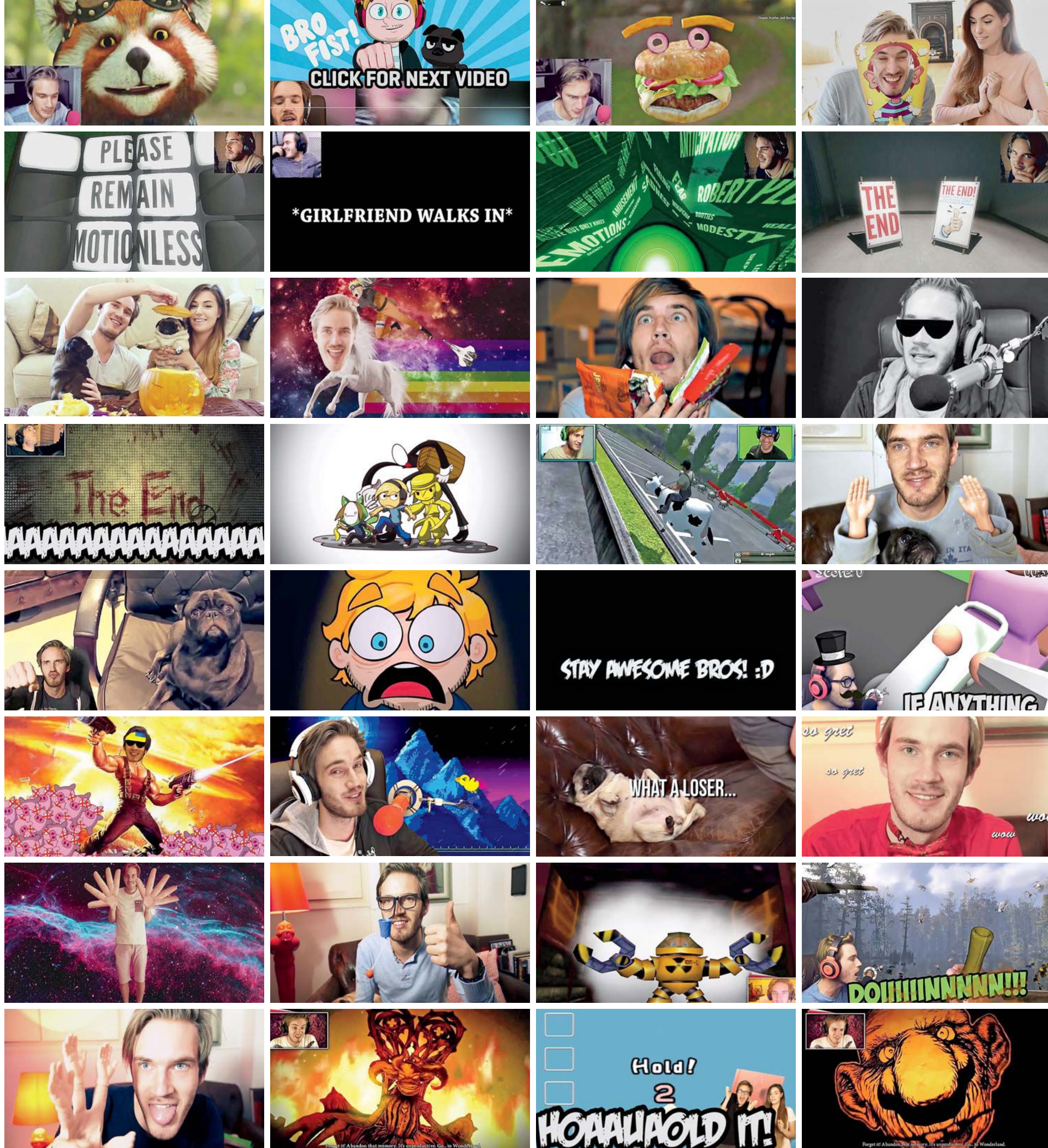
THE MAN WHO GAMED THE WORLD



FOR TWO YEARS, A GAME-PLAYING GOOF CALLED PEWDIEPIE HAS BEEN YOUTUBE'S MOST POPULAR PERFORMER. WE TREK TO ENGLAND TO DISCOVER HOW FELIX KJELLBERG CONVINCED A GENERATION THAT IT'S MORE FUN TO WATCH THAN TO PLAY.

BY WAYNE DREHS







FOR TWO DAYS, I HAVE CRISSCROSSED BRIGHTON, ENGLAND, A BEACHFRONT TOWN TWO HOURS SOUTH OF LONDON, IN SEARCH OF THE KING OF YOUTUBE.

His name is Felix Kjellberg, but he's best known by his channel name, PewDiePie, a persona the 25-year-old Swede created five years ago, before dropping out of college to upload videos of himself playing games full time. His clips are brash, crude and expletive-laced. Depending on your age, open-mindedness and overall level of maturity, they fall somewhere between sidesplitting comedy and crass frat boy humor. (If you laugh upon hearing a man yell "Ughh, right in the baby maker" while a virtual skateboarder lands crotch-first on a railing, then PewDiePie is your man.)

But whether they're laughing or cringing, people are watching—37,000,997 people, to be exact. At least, that's where the count stood on his exponentially growing legion of YouTube subscribers as of 7 p.m. ET on June 3, easily the most in the site's history and more than pop stars Taylor Swift, One Direction and Sam Smith *combined*. His videos have nearly 9 billion starts, enough for every human on the planet to watch once, with almost 2 billion views left over. And after dubbing PewDiePie a

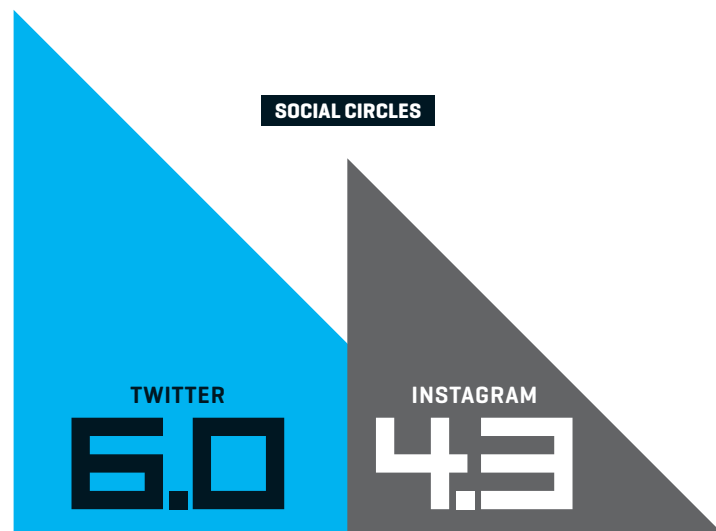
"gibberish-spouting clown" in 2013, *Variety* reported last summer that he had a higher Q Score among 13- to 17-year-olds than any actor or actress in Hollywood. *The Wall Street Journal* reported last year that PewDiePie pockets \$4 million annually thanks to his share of the revenue generated from the ads that precede his videos.

"The guy is amazing," says Karen North, director of USC's master's program in digital social media. "Here's this guy with a webcam, and he's more successful than carefully managed movie stars and singers. There's just something about him that can't be explained."

Of course, to folks of a certain age, the only thing more inexplicable than PewDiePie is the very genre he inhabits—a form of entertainment in which watching someone play a video game is considered more entertaining than playing the game itself. The phenomenon, dubbed "Let's Play," consists of gamers uploading or live-streaming practice sessions while providing entertaining and usually profane commentary—and to say it's become big business is a gross under-



SOCIAL CIRCLES



PEWDIEPIE'S FOLLOWERS, IN MILLIONS

statement. Last August *Forbes* reported that Amazon had plunked down \$970 million for Twitch, a site that streams live Let's Plays and has become the fourth-most-visited site during peak hours in the U.S. That megadeal came just after the Walt Disney Company (owner of ESPN) paid more than \$500 million for Maker Studios, the Hollywood media company that works with PewDiePie and more than 55,000

other online content creators.

The battle for tween and teen eyeballs is no longer being waged primarily among the major TV networks but rather among Amazon (Twitch), Google (YouTube) and every media conglomerate wanting a piece of the gaming pie. And at the center of it all is unassuming, blue-eyed Kjellberg. All of which has brought me to Brighton, the place he has called home since 2013, to track down the reclusive man. As I climb the concrete steps and approach what I've been told is his front door, I pray only that he doesn't call the police. He has granted few interviews and told *The Daily Mail* in January that he was finished with the media. In April, his publicist declined my request, saying he was "unavailable." So too was his Italian girlfriend, 22-year-old Marzia Bisognin, a fellow YouTube star whom he met online and now lives with on this quiet street, not too far from the English Channel.

"Hello," says a man, when I press the silver intercom button. I've watched enough PewDiePie videos to recognize his voice. "Is Felix there?" I ask. "Yes," he replies, buzzing me in with nary a word. Inside the building, peeking around an apartment door is Kjellberg, in black-rimmed glasses, khakis and a blue button-down with an "F" embroidered on the chest. He looks curious and concerned. When I explain why I'm here, he seems caught off guard, a bit rattled. But he doesn't scream or tell me he's going to kick me in the baby maker. He pauses. He nods. Then he asks whether we can chat while he walks his pug, Edgar.

It takes only a few blocks in the company of Felix Kjellberg to sense that he and PewDiePie are nothing alike. Felix doesn't curse at a car that almost hits us or at a woman who cuts us off on the sidewalk. He apologizes every time we bump into each other and every time Edgar's leash crosses my path. Still, when I suggest that he is not the overcaffeinated computer character but rather a shy, preppy intellectual, he seems taken aback. "You can't be crazy all the time," he says. "That's why my videos are all, like, five minutes—nobody can handle

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UNIKRN, WHICH LAUNCHED eSPORTS BETTING IN APRIL, ALREADY HAS \$5 MILLION COMMITTED TO DATE.

Gambling on Gaming

The majority of eSports fans are between 21 and 35, according to SuperData Research. That means many of the top gamers and their fans can vote, drink—and gamble. Good news for several startups that are literally betting on the continued growth of eSports.

Unikrn launched in April and partnered with Tabcorp, an Australian-based wagering company, to help navigate the tricky waters of sports betting. (Unikrn is based in Seattle, but betting real money on eSports isn't legal in the U.S., so the site's stateside users can only view odds and watch live streams.) "Unikrn and Tabcorp are straight betting," says Unikrn CEO Rahul Sood. "We provide odds, you bet against the house. It's simple."

Florida-based Proxy allows gamers to gamble on any eSports title with cash or bet with virtual currency that can be used to win prizes like gaming keyboards. U.S. users can play too, either betting for those prizes or on Proxy's own fantasy games. "We love eSports and understand that it is fundamentally different than traditional sports," says CEO Justin Twohig.

The next step for these startups and others like them? "Creating a fan base that will evangelize your product until they're blue in the face," Sood says. With a universe of gamers more than a billion strong, he adds, "I can only see this getting bigger." —JOHN GAUDIOSI

me for longer than that s---." He pauses. We keep walking. "I don't know. It's funny how you say that. I feel like I'm exactly how I am in my videos."

ON OCT. 24, 1989, Johanna and Ulf Kjellberg named their first son Felix, Latin for "the lucky one." Successful corporate executives—Johanna was once named Sweden's CIO of the year—the Kjellbergs groomed Felix to follow suit, but their son's passion was video games. He always wanted to play more; they always wanted him to play less. Despite his preoccupation, Felix made straight As and got into the industrial engineering master's program at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden, the same college his mother attended.

"I was bored," he says. "It was not what I wanted to do with my life."

But unlike most video-game-obsessed 20-year-olds, Felix had a plan. Five years earlier, in 2005, it is widely believed that the first iteration of Let's Play was conceived on a forum for the comedy website Something Awful. Built around the classic computer game the Oregon Trail, the forum was nothing more than posts and screen grabs, but diehards began flooding the site with play-by-plays of themselves navigating their favorite games. Aided by the ubiquity of digital video technology, Let's Play took off, and Felix was eager to join the movement, launching his PewDiePie YouTube account on April 29, 2010.

The inspiration for his handle was the noise a laser makes when it shoots (*pew*) and the act of dying (*die*), and he added *pie* after a forgotten password because ... well, everyone likes pie. A signature style soon emerged: All videos open with a screech ("MY NAME IS PEWWWDIEPIE!") and end with a bro fist and a directive to "STAY AWESOME!"

He took to it all with a convert's zeal, selling his own artwork to pay for production equipment. "I remember getting one subscriber was so exciting," he says. Felix stuck mostly to horror titles at first, and he found that the more he overdramatized his reactions when a ghost or goblin jumped out, the more his subscriber base grew. When he dropped out of Chalmers, his parents refused to support him, so he worked at a hot dog stand to feed his obsession. By December 2011, his following had reached 60,000, and he had quit the hot dog stand. In December 2012, he signed with Maker,

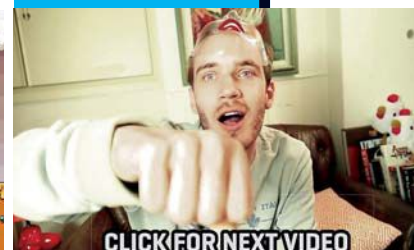
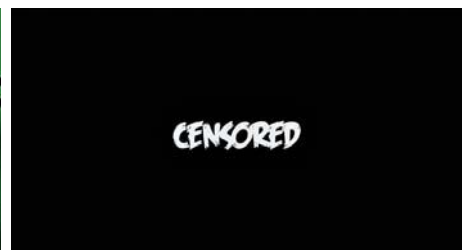
and he eclipsed 5 million subscribers on Feb. 18, 2013. Every time Maker's executive VP of talent, Amy Finnerty, tried to plan a celebration, PewDiePie would surpass a new milestone. "It got to the point where it was 'stop putting numbers on the invitations and just throw the darn party,'" she says.

As his followers diversified, so did his catalog. Rather than strictly horror, PewDiePie began gravitating toward obscure games created by independent developers, games that tend to exist on the fringes of acceptable content and allow him to push the envelope with his sketch comedy—a girl picking a pair of underwear before she heads to school and stabs her classmates, hoping the boy she loves will notice; a mosquito sucking blood from a topless chiseled man cranking reps on a bench press; a father maniacally pedaling his bicycle through an obstacle course, decapitating himself and his son in the process.

"The humor, I just don't understand it," his mom told a Swedish TV station in 2012. "I'll see in the comments, 'Check out 4:26. I've never laughed so hard in my life.' I'll go there and don't find anything that resembles a joke."

And therein lies the enigma of PewDiePie—revered by millions, misunderstood by his own mom. So what's the appeal? Some suggest it's rooted in his internationalism; he is attractive, was born in Sweden, lived for a time in Italy and resides in England. Others chalk it all up to his upload schedule; new videos appear almost daily, and in this viral age, once someone creates a buzz, no one, especially teenagers, wants to be left out. So it was that around 7:30 p.m. ET on Aug. 15, 2013, PewDiePie overtook





comedy duo Smosh as the most-subscribed-to channel in YouTube history. (Smosh held the title for 216 days.) He has more than tripled his subscriber base in the two years since, and the industry has exploded around him.

In April, YouTube had 100 gaming-themed channels from 22 countries with more than 23.5 million views each, and Twitch was averaging more than 100 million viewers a month by the end of 2014. Yet for many non-millennials, the allure remains a mystery. Even *South Park* joined the

fray—Kyle ranting in an episode last year after his younger brother chose to watch PewDiePie play Call of Duty rather than play it himself. “Video games are supposed to be played in a living room. Not something to watch people comment on,” Kyle complained. “OK, Grandpa,” his brother’s friend shot back.

“Part of this [success] is digital entertainment replacing preprogrammed entertainment,” says longtime game developer John Romero. “And part of it is the rise of reality TV. With Let’s Play, anybody

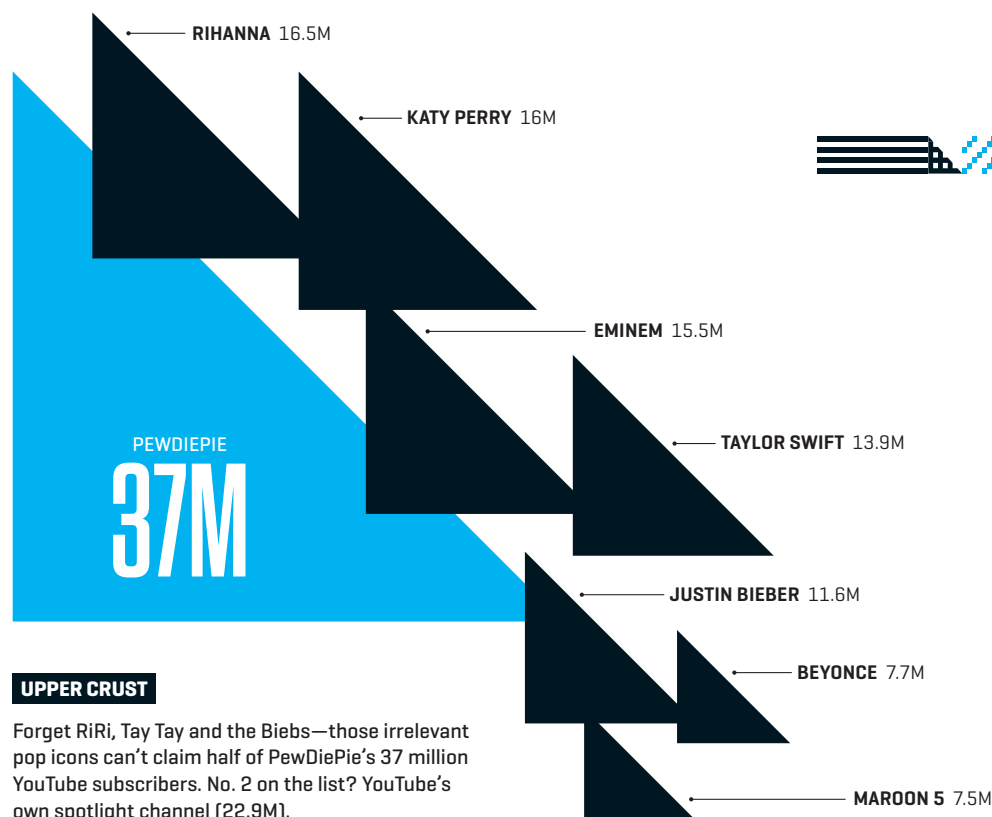
can be a reality entertainment star.”

Today, PewDiePie hosts a weekly segment dedicated to testing off-the-wall products like bacon toothpaste and bacon soda. He plays Cards Against Humanity with Bisognin. They whack each other with oversized inflatable penises. His “Fridays With PewDiePie” are like ADD fireside chats. In one video, “Things I Wish I Knew,” he waxes poetic: “I didn’t always like myself,” PewDiePie says into the camera, “but now I love myself. Accept yourself for who you are. Being different is not a bad thing.

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UPPER CRUST

Forget RiRi, Tay Tay and the Biebs—those irrelevant pop icons can't claim half of PewDiePie's 37 million YouTube subscribers. No. 2 on the list? YouTube's own spotlight channel [22.9M].

It's a great thing." For a fan base made up largely of teens, the message hits home.

"His is a phenomenal lesson in inclusiveness and how to engage people," says North, the USC professor. Indeed, Kjellberg and his followers have raised more than \$1 million for various charities. "It's not 'watch me play.' It's 'we're the Bro Army.' He's cheering for them as they're cheering for him."

Of course, for every member of the Bro Army, there's a hard-core gamer who can't stand the obnoxious Swede, who isn't particularly skilled at gaming (and doesn't pretend to be) and doesn't dabble in competitive eSports tournament games such as World of Warcraft. PewDiePie even set the industry abuzz last September when he turned off his YouTube comments to block out the trolls—the equivalent of LeBron James refusing to tweet. Brendan Sinclair, a senior editor for GamesIndustry.biz, compares PewDiePie's mass appeal to *Titanic*, the 1998 Best Picture winner and one of the highest-grossing films of all time. "When *Titanic* came out, I saw it and thought it was competent but contrived," he says. "It drove me up the wall that [everyone] couldn't see its many glaring flaws. By the time the Oscars rolled around, the mere mention of the movie would set me off on a tirade. My sense is the gamers who don't appreciate PewDiePie are going through the same thing."

ON THE STREETS of Brighton, most everyone looks the same—young, energetic, eager to succeed. In February, *The Sunday Times* declared this strip of nearly 300,000 people, which includes neighboring Hove, "Silicon Beach," where tech comes to chill.

As Edgar tugs on the leash, sniffing everything in sight, Kjellberg and I walk a path that borders the English Channel. It's late afternoon, the sun is shining. The winds off the water are beginning to calm. "You got a good day here," he says. "It's usually horrible British weather."

When I take the moment to tell him I was moved by "Things I Wish I Knew"—which I genuinely was—he seems shocked. "Really?" he asks. "You liked it? I feel like my videos are so stupid. But I don't know ... I mean ... I know what it was like to be a teenager, and if for some reason I can be there for someone who is younger going through a rough time, that's cool. I'm glad I can help."

He admits that luck was on his side, that if someone else had been the breakout Let's Player, "I'd probably be dying of jealousy and hate that person." But he's adamant that this—37 million subscribers—was no accident. There are sleepless nights, 12-hour days. Even when he's not being PewDiePie, his mind is racing with ideas: "It's the hardest job I will ever have. I struggle to shut it off."

Aware that he's far outlived the shelf life of a YouTube star, he does everything he can to stave off the inevitable.

He thought his run was over when he reached 10 million subscribers in July 2013 and became the No. 1 YouTube channel the next month. He told Finnerty his subscriptions would plateau. But this April his page generated nearly 352 million views, a 19 percent increase over March.

"I've always kept the approach that next month might not work out," he says. "That's the healthy way to be."

As we turn back toward his apartment, I'm struck by a notion: No one has stopped Kjellberg for an autograph, for a selfie or just to say hello. For half an hour, the teenage world's most popular man has strolled the streets in anonymity. "It's nice here," he says. He tells me he and Bisognin have made friends but are cautious of those who are only after their celebrity. It's one of the reasons they've decided not to live in L.A. "Anytime I'm there, people are constantly patting you on the back, telling you how great you are. It f---s with your brain. I started YouTube because I was bored, not to become famous."

But what if he woke up tomorrow and the money, the fame and the adoration were gone? What if he woke up a former YouTube star?

He reins in Edgar. "I don't know," he says. "I feel like I've gotten more out of YouTube than I ever wanted or expected. I'd probably feel a little bit lonely, but in the end I'd be OK. It's not that important. I'm not curing cancer. It's not that special to upload videos on the Internet."

As I extend my hand and thank him for his time, I feel bizarrely obligated to ask for a selfie—something I've never done, much less ask for an autograph, in 15 years as a sports writer. But this time, with this subject, it feels different. I downplay the request, insisting that it's not as if I'm a huge fan or anything. Kjellberg agrees. Then he chuckles.

"You're a fan," he says. "You can admit it. It's OK. You love my videos." ■

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THE ONE AND ONLY

WIMBLEDON

BY JOEL DRUCKER AND BRIAN BERK

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The writer F. Scott Fitzgerald once noted, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

If Fitzgerald’s premise is true, then Wimbledon’s brain sparkles. For more than 100 years, with considerable grace and style, the All England Lawn Tennis Club (AELTC) has balanced tradition and innovation, competition and community. “As the world’s premier tennis tournament, we need to be modern, progressive and consistently take in new ideas,” goes the AELTC’s often-quoted mantra.

“If you appreciate the past, you can properly build the future,” said Billie Jean King, winner of a record 20 Wimbledon titles.

This appealing yin-yang is constantly present at the AELTC. The dress code remains all white, a statement of immunity to the cycles of fashion. Grass remains the playing surface. It’s possible to wander the grounds, partake in a serving of strawberries and cream and feel as if you were strolling through an English garden party. But yes, you can maintain minute-to-minute contact with the tournament on just about any device imaginable from every corner of the globe.



FROM LEFT, PHOTOS BY AP PHOTO - ALLEN KEE / ESPN IMAGES - GILL ALLEN / AP PHOTO - SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES

And prize money—more than \$40 million this year—has nearly doubled in the past four years.

The biggest innovation for 2015 will likely increase the quality of play. For decades, there has always been a two-week gap between the conclusion of the French Open and the start of Wimbledon. An extra week has been added this year. “We hope all players will come here well-rested, well-prepared and well-adjusted to compete on grass,” said AELTC chairman Philip Brook.

Innovation remains a cornerstone of Wimbledon’s attitude toward the future. First there was the “long-term plan,” launched in 1993, which

has been responsible for numerous enhancements both big and small, including the roof on Centre Court, and a new No. 1 Court, No. 2 Court and No. 3 Court. Now there is the Wimbledon “master plan,” at the heart of which is the redevelopment of No. 1 Court that will include a roof that could be ready by 2019. And then there are subtle changes in everything from landscaping to walkways to food and practice facilities. “The key is to take a long-term view,” said Johnny Perkins, AELTC head of corporate communications. “We take inspiration and pride in our past, but it’s not tradition for tradition’s sake.”

MEN'S PREVIEW

WIMBLEDON 2015



JUNE 29 - JULY 12

Of all the Big Four's accomplishments, the most impressive might be the group's ability to continually brush aside the invaders at the gates. The criticisms have often surfaced: Novak Djokovic's grit, Roger Federer's age, Andy Murray's emotions and Rafael Nadal's health. Yet here we are, still waiting for an outsider to break the elites' grasp on the men's tennis universe. The Big Four have won 37 of the past 40 major titles, including every Wimbledon title since 2003. So let the criticisms fly. They don't seem to matter much to this group.



PHOTO BY ALLEN KEE / ESPN IMAGES

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPIONYEARS
2011, 2014

This year started off a lot like 2008, 2011, 2012 and 2013 for Djokovic. He won his fifth Australian Open title after defeating defending champion Stan Wawrinka in the semis and Andy Murray in the final. He also won the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells and the Miami Open, beating Roger Federer and Murray, respectively. But it's not all about the hardcourt for the world's top-ranked tennis player. On clay, Djokovic went through Rafael Nadal and Tomas Berdych to ultimately claim the top spot at the Monte-Carlo Rolex Masters, before his triumph over Federer again to take the Rome title as well.

He'll head back to SW19 this year looking to defend his title and bring home his third Wimbledon crown.

WIMBLEDON FACTS

491,084

ATTENDANCE IN '14

54,250

BALLS USED (STORED AT 68 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT)

142,000

PORTIONS OF STRAWBERRIES CONSUMED IN '12

10

MINUTES TO CLOSE CENTRE COURT ROOF

74

NUMBER OF SEATS IN ROYAL BOX

7

RAIN-FREE TOURNAMENTS SINCE 1922
(MOST RECENT: 2010)

40+

MILES OF STRING USED ON ABOUT 2,000
RACKETS STRUNG IN '14

50,000+

PLANTS SUPPLIED EACH YEAR

PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES



ROGER FEDERER

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPIONYEARS
2003-2007, 2009, 2012

At 33 years young, Federer takes the court ready to show that he's got a lot left in the tank, despite claiming just one major title in the past five years. He started the year off by becoming just the third man in the Open era to reach the 1,000-match win mark after beating Milos Raonic in the final at the Brisbane International. After a disappointing early exit at the Australian Open, Federer went on to beat top-ranked Novak Djokovic to win the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships and in the spring won a clay court tournament in Istanbul.

With 17 grand slam singles titles under his belt, seven of those at Wimbledon, Federer heads to London with the poise, experience and determination one can find only in a veteran of his unmatched caliber.

PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES



ANDY MURRAY

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPIONYEAR
2013

Murray started off the year as the sixth seed at the Australian Open, defeating his first three opponents without dropping a set. He made it all the way to the final before succumbing to top-ranked Novak Djokovic in four sets. His spring clay court season was remarkable: Murray won his first-ever title on the dirt in Munich, and then a little more than a week later, he took down Rafael Nadal in the final of Madrid. The man from Scotland hopes to win his second Wimbledon championship and his third grand slam overall.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARIES GALORE

Notable anniversaries are always a part of Wimbledon. Some years there is but a trickle, but 2015 marks a cascade. Let the river flow:

GOLDEN MOMENTS

10 YEARS AGO

AMERICAN WOMEN Over the course of nearly three hours, Americans Venus Williams and Lindsay Davenport composed a masterpiece. Each had previously won Wimbledon, Davenport in '99, Williams beating Davenport in the 2000 final and repeating the next year. Davenport, as formidable a ball striker as tennis has ever seen, took the first set 6-4, and in the second she served for the title at 6-5. The tenacious Williams leveled it and handily took the tiebreaker. Drama continued throughout the third, Davenport going up 4-2 and even holding a championship point at 4-5. But Williams responded with a sharp backhand winner. Williams went on to take the decider 9-7 to become the first woman in 70 years to face championship point and win the title. Said a shaken but classy Davenport, "Every time the chips were down for Venus, she played unbelievably." Said Williams: "I knew my destiny was to be in the winner's circle."

PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES



RAFAEL NADAL

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPION

YEARS
2008, 2010

It's been a frustrating year for Nadal. In the 2015 Australian Open, he was soundly beaten in the quarterfinals by Tomas Berdych. And though he went on to win his 46th career clay court title in Buenos Aires, his spring clay court season leading up to the French Open was marred by surprising losses—including one to Andy Murray in the final of Madrid. That loss knocked Nadal out of the top five for the first time in a decade.

Nadal has fallen short of the Wimbledon quarterfinal stage the past three years and looks to put his struggles behind him as he heads to London seeking his third Wimbledon crown.

PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES



MILOS RAONIC

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
SEMIFINALS

YEAR
2014

When this 24-year-old Canadian steps onto the court, his biggest weapon is his serve—the top asset a contender can bring to Wimbledon. Novak Djokovic once commented that Raonic “has one of the best serves in the world. Very powerful, very precise.” He started out 2015 by going all the way to the final at the Brisbane International but ultimately lost to a man named Federer. On May 11, Raonic reached a career-high ranking of No. 4 in the world. This year he'll head to Wimbledon looking to top his 2014 semifinals appearance, also the best major result of his young career.

The big question is how well Raonic recovers from his early-May foot surgery; he had to withdraw from this year's French Open.

NOTABLE CONTENDERS



PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES

GRIGOR DIMITROV

Dimitrov's big breakthrough came last year at Wimbledon when he knocked off 2013 defending champion Andy Murray in the quarters. From there he lost a tight four-set semi to eventual winner Novak Djokovic—a fortnight that showed he has the potential to go even further.



PHOTO BY BEN CURTIS / AP IMAGES

NICK KYRGIOS

At just 20 years old, Kyrgios has already made a name for himself by defeating Rafael Nadal at Wimbledon last year. This spring he knocked off Roger Federer in Madrid. The young Australian will head to London a little older, a little wiser and with a lot more confidence.



PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES

KEI NISHIKORI

The only Japanese men's player ever to crack the top five, Nishikori announced his presence last year with a run to the 2014 U.S. Open final. The 25-year-old will bring his fierce groundstrokes to Wimbledon this summer, hoping to advance past the fourth round for the first time.



FROM LEFT, PHOTOS BY SUZANNE PLUNKETT / AP PHOTO - SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES - SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES - ANJA NIEDRINGHAUS / AP PHOTO - AP PHOTO

GOING THE DISTANCE

WINNING THE WIMBLEDON EPIC

It's late June or early July at the All England Lawn Tennis Club. It could be past 4 p.m., likely beyond 5, maybe even 7 or 8. The match is deep into its decisive set. Shadows fall, lengthen. The glare of the sun casts a yellow tint over the grass. Not a sound can be heard save for the striking of the ball and the umpire announcing the score. Everyone knows what's at stake, from the thousands of spectators to the millions across the globe watching on television or listening on the radio or online. No one, of course, is more attuned to each tick than the two players.

This is the Wimbledon epic, joyous for those watching, anguish for its two protagonists. No one understands this better than Roger Federer. Of the nine Wimbledon singles finals he has played, four have gone the distance, with Federer winning in 2007 and 2009 and losing in 2008 and 2014. "Tennis is cruel sometimes," he said after his 16-14 win in the fifth over Andy Roddick in 2009, a reality Federer knew all too well, given that the previous year, he lost that final to Rafael Nadal 9-7 in the fifth.

So much about Wimbledon—the aura, the grass, the history, the consequences—can turn laserlike focus into a surreal, out-of-body

experience. "You become mesmerized by the court, the setting, the quiet and all that it means," said John Newcombe, who won back-to-back five-set singles finals in 1970 and '71. "But then, just before you start that last set, you only have a little time to define yourself and think about how you're going to enter the cauldron."

Up against Lindsay Davenport in the 2005 final, victor Venus Williams summoned an insight she'd gained from another Wimbledon champion. "I was listening to Billie Jean King," said Williams. "She said to enjoy the moment. That's what I try to do out on the court."

A year ago in the final, Novak Djokovic led Federer two sets to one and 5-2, only to lose five straight games. Going on to win that final set 6-4, Djokovic noted: "Experience kicks in and the work that you're doing with yourself and your team comes to play."

It's likely that no one understands the ebb and flow of an epic better than John Isner and Nicolas Mahut, participants in the 2010 first-round match that Isner ended up winning by the jaw-dropping score of 70-68 in the fifth. Said Isner, speaking not just for himself but likely for all who watched, "I was completely delirious."



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30 YEARS AGO

THE BIRTH OF BORIS Once upon a time, there was a German who competed with the joy of precisely what he was: a 17-year-old boy. Whether pounding down a big serve, striking a bold return or diving for a volley, Boris Becker relished every challenge posed at Wimbledon. And in 1985 he faced many. In the third round, Becker squeaked past Joakim Nystrom 9-7 in the fifth, the Swede having served for the match twice. In his next match, trailing two sets to one against American Tim Mayotte, Becker was nearly derailed by an ankle injury. But he persevered and arrived in the final to face Kevin Curren, who'd beaten both John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors. "At 17, you're still a boy, really, a young man, a very young man," Becker said 25 years later. "You haven't found your personality. Your character isn't set." No matter. Becker handled Curren with nary a trace of nerves, becoming Wimbledon's youngest and first unseeded men's champion.

40 YEARS AGO

THE LEGEND OF KING ARTHUR Arthur Ashe was 31 years old and an 11-2 underdog as he took the court against defending champion Jimmy Connors. Connors had been at his fire-breathing best, failing to drop a set. Ashe, winless over Connors in three previous meetings, huddled with his mates to concoct a gutsy new strategy, one based on Ashe ditching his power game in favor of off-pace, rope-a-dope tactics. Executing his plan flawlessly, Ashe won the first two sets 6-1, 6-1 in a staggering 41 minutes. But Connors was never beaten until the last point. He rallied to take the third and go up a break in the fourth. A resolute and exceptionally tranquil Ashe maintained his plan, fighting back, closing it out—and, in a rare Ashe gesture, making a small fist pump once he'd earned tennis's greatest prize.



PHOTO BY AP IMAGES

INTERVIEW: THE INCREDIBLE EMMO

No man has won more grand slam titles than Australian Roy Emerson (12 singles, 16 doubles). "Emmo" racked up five titles at Wimbledon, including back-to-back singles victories and three doubles titles in three separate decades. On the eve of the 50th anniversary of his singles repeat, Emmo reflected on the journey from a family farm in the Australian Outback to Centre Court.

What are your first memories of Wimbledon?

Probably when I was 10. We listened to it on the radio, to our fellow Australians John Bromwich and Frank Sedgman. But we didn't have much time for tennis. There was a lot of work to do on the farm.

You first came to Wimbledon in 1954 when you were 17. Talk about that first experience. I was in awe. I couldn't believe what a terrific tennis center Wimbledon was. It was my dream to always go there and play. I was part of the traveling Australian Davis Cup team. Me and Ashley Cooper were the practice partners for Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall.

What did you see it was going to take to win Wimbledon? I wasn't very good when I was 17 and so I had a lot to improve, particularly my forehand, forehand volley and serve. In '58 when I was 21 years old, I figured it was better to not play. So I stayed back home and worked on my game with Frank Sedgman. The next year I got to the Wimbledon semis for the first time.

How was it in 1964 to come to Wimbledon as the top seed, at last expected to win the title? In '63, I was seeded first but lost in the quarters. So in '64, I changed my preparation. I'd typically played several grass court tournaments prior to Wimbledon. But there was often rain, so you wouldn't end up playing that much. So instead, I worked indoors on the wood courts at The Queen's Club in London. Spent a good eight to 10 days hitting a lot in the morning, then playing five or six sets in the afternoon.

Compare and contrast winning your first Wimbledon with your second. The first time, I was a little nervous before serving at match point—worried I wouldn't be able to toss the ball up. There was rain during that match too, so we had to come off the court four times. And in those days, when you came back from a rain delay there was no warm-up. The second time, I felt confident and glad I could prove that me winning Wimbledon wasn't a fluke.

In both finals you played your good mate Fred Stolle. Fred and I shared a flat. The morning of the '65 final, I made scrambled eggs for him ... and then we rode out together, practiced for about 20 minutes and then played the final.

How was it then for you to be playing both singles and doubles? Any exceptionally long days? One year on Court Two I won a match 11-9 in the fourth. Then there was a women's match, followed by me and Fred playing doubles. But one of the girls sprained her ankle in the first or second game, so while I was taking a shower the referee came in and asked if I was ready to play. I said, "Sure, let's go." Our doubles match lasted until nearly 10 p.m. So basically I'd been on Court Two for eight hours.

Any interesting actions with fans during your playing days? In 1970, I was deep into a quarterfinal vs. John Newcombe when I lost a button on my shorts. That was the only pair I had. So I called to the stands and asked if anyone had a safety pin. A woman came down and I was able to pin the pants together and keep playing.

What do you continue to enjoy about Wimbledon? I came there a few years ago for the first time in more than 30 years. The venue is so huge now. I got lost. But the atmosphere is still fantastic. There's so much tension on Centre Court, you can hear a pin drop. I'm looking forward to coming back again this year.



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WOMEN'S PREVIEW

WIMBLEDON 2015



JUNE 29 - JULY 12

If women's tennis is still Serena's world, Petra Kvitova has no problem living in it. The pair have combined to win five of the past six Wimbledon ladies' singles titles and are again the two favorites entering this year's contest. They'll be looking to hold off a number of challengers—some well-known and some looking to become household names—populating this summer's exceptionally deep field.



PHOTO BY ALLEN KEE / ESPN IMAGES

SERENA WILLIAMS

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPIONYEARS
2002, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2012

The bad news is that Serena Williams dropped her Mutua Madrid Open semifinal match against Petra Kvitova in straight sets in early May. The good news is that it was her first loss of 2015, ending a ridiculous streak of 27 straight wins dating to October 2014. She's still ranked a dominant world No. 1, still the winner of 19 grand slams, still a five-time Wimbledon champion, and most important, she's still Serena Williams. Another sustained run at Wimbledon is expected.

WIMBLEDON FACTS

350,000

CUPS OF TEA AND COFFEE IN '14

22

DRESSING ROOM ATTENDANTS IN '14

25,000

TOWELS SOLD IN '14 (16,000 MEN'S/9,000 WOMEN'S)

123

NUMBER OF BALLS USED IN ISNER-MAHUT 2010 EPIC

HAWK-EYE CHALLENGES

428

MEN'S CHALLENGES MADE

120

CORRECT (28 PERCENT)

191

WOMEN'S CHALLENGES MADE

49

CORRECT (25.7 PERCENT)



PHOTO BY PHIL ELLSWORTH / ESPN IMAGES

SIMONA HALEP

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
SEMIFINALSYEAR
2014

Prior to 2014, Halep was a relative unknown with limited success. The past two years, she's gotten a whole lot more used to the W's. The 23-year-old Romanian has been right in the thick of her past five majors, reaching a pair of quarterfinals (2014 and 2015 Australian Open), a semifinal (2014 Wimbledon) and a final (2014 French Open). Her title win at Indian Wells earlier this year was one of her biggest to date, and she's become a mainstay in the top five.



PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES

MARIA SHARAPOVA

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPIONYEAR
2004

Inconsistency has been the name of Sharapova's 2015 game. After 10 straight wins vaulted her into the Australian Open final (where she lost to Serena Williams), she suffered through a couple of early exits before rebounding to reach the semis at the Madrid Classic and claim the title in Rome. The 28-year-old Russian has fallen short of the quarterfinal at Wimbledon seven of the past eight years, her appearance in the 2011 final her best finish during that stretch. Fans worldwide are anxious to see which version of 2015 Sharapova shows up in London this summer.



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HONORABLE MENTION

25 YEARS AGO

LONG LIVE THE QUEEN Zina Garrison had become the first African-American woman to reach a grand slam singles final in more than 30 years. But her opponent, Martina Navratilova, was on a crusade, at 33 having spent the last year working with six-time Wimbledon singles champion Billie Jean King in the hopes of capturing a record ninth Wimbledon singles title. In 75 minutes of exemplary attacking tennis, Navratilova won 6-4, 6-1.

35 YEARS AGO

FIRE AND ICE John McEnroe was looking to topple four-time champ Bjorn Borg. The sublime reached the superb when the two squared off in a fourth-set tiebreak, won by McEnroe 18-16. But in the end, it was Bjorn again, 1-6, 7-5, 6-3, 6-7, 8-6.

45 YEARS AGO

COURT AND KING The two best of the '60s, Margaret Court and Billie Jean King, kicked off a new decade with a thrilling epic, Court squeaking out two tight sets by the never-to-be-repeated score of 14-12, 11-9.

50 YEARS AGO

AUSSIE MATES FOREVER For the second year in a row, Australian roommates Roy Emerson and Fred Stolle met in the final. Emerson cooked breakfast for Stolle that morning, shortly before the two rode out to Wimbledon together for a pre-match hit. Emerson was not so kind that afternoon, taking just 67 minutes to devour Stolle, 6-2, 6-4, 6-4.

WIMBLEDON 2015

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PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES

PETRA KVITOVA

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
CHAMPION

YEARS
2011, 2014

The Wimbledon grass loves a hard hitter, and Kvitova certainly has returned those feelings over the years. The defending champ finds a way to rise to the occasion at Wimbledon. While she has been known to suffer through occasional early-round exits, the longer Kvitova plays in a tournament the better she gets. She's an aggressive lefty with a monster serve and thundering groundstrokes, tailor-made for Wimbledon. Her two titles back up that assessment. As long as she stays focused in the early rounds, the road to the 2015 Championships title runs through the 25-year-old.



PHOTO BY ALLEN KEE / ESPN IMAGES

CAROLINE WOZNIACKI

BEST WIMBLEDON FINISH
FOURTH ROUND

YEARS
2009, 2010, 2011, 2014

The former world No. 1 is in the midst of a nice resurgence, again becoming one of the game's top female threats after scuffling through much of 2013 and 2014. She rebounded to reach the U.S. Open final in New York in 2014 and then famously completed that city's marathon. Wozniacki, 24, said the experience of training for a marathon helped improve her play, and she's again a mainstay in the top five. At Wimbledon, Wozniacki has never advanced past the tournament's fourth round in singles. A personal-best performance in London would contribute much to her comeback story.

NOTABLE CONTENDERS



PHOTO BY ELLA LING / AP IMAGES

EUGENIE BOUCHARD

Bouchard was the darling of the sport in 2014, reaching the Wimbledon final in addition to semifinal runs in the Australian and French Opens. Fast-forward a few months and the 21-year-old Canadian is struggling with her form and an extended losing streak. If she can right the ship in time, she'll be back among the contenders.



PHOTO BY ALASTAIR GRANT / AP IMAGES

MADISON KEYS

The 20-year-old American earned her best performance ever earlier this year, reaching the semifinal of the Australian Open before losing to eventual champ Serena Williams. She earned perhaps an even greater accolade following the match, when Serena called Keys a future No. 1.



PHOTO BY SCOTT CLARKE / ESPN IMAGES

VENUS WILLIAMS

It's been seven years since Venus won her fifth Wimbledon title—her last major championship. That dry spell included a stretch from 2011 to 2014 during which she never advanced past the fourth round at a major. She broke that dubious streak with a quarterfinal run at the 2015 Australian Open, showing that she might just have another run left.



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[FOR THE LOVE OF ELLIS VALENTINE] *A decade after MLB abandoned Montreal, the city might step up as a fix for the game's Oakland and Tampa problems. C'est pas vrai!*

[T]alk to baseball fans in Montreal, real ones, ones who remember the last good days before the sabotage and the theft, and they can tell you all about June 27, 1994, the night the second-place Expos were hosting the first-place Braves. Over 45,000 people packed Olympic Stadium for the series opener to witness ace Ken Hill, 10–3, against ace Greg Maddux, also 10–3. It was perhaps the loudest the house had ever been, louder even than during the 1981 playoffs against the Dodgers, especially when Cliff Floyd delivered the knockout blow, a home run off Maddux in the seventh. Hill bested the great Maddux. Montreal took two of three. These Expos had arrived.

Forty-four days later, Pedro Martinez beat the Pirates 4–0. In between, the Expos played like an elite team. Then, on the 46th day, with an MLB-best record of 74–40, the Expos players, along with the rest of baseball, went on strike. Ask many of those same fans about that day, Aug. 12, 1994, and they'll tell you the strike killed the game in Montreal.

Now the Nationals, the former Expos, are celebrating 10 years of baseball in Washington while Montreal marks a decade without it. But amazingly, MLB is sending signals that it believes the city is ready for a second act. Over the past two years, Montreal has hosted Blue Jays exhibition games to packed houses. And during a June 1 Cardinals-Brewers game, commissioner Rob Manfred said he wants more games played in Montreal. He's even met with the city's mayor, Denis Coderre, about bringing the game back north. All this suggests MLB is employing the time-honored strategy of the test balloon. (After Bill Bartholomay moved the Milwaukee Braves to Atlanta in 1966, Bud Selig arranged for the Chicago White Sox to play games in Milwaukee in hopes of eventually stealing them. That never happened, so Selig grabbed the expansion Seattle Pilots instead.)

It's not hard to figure out what's driving the Montreal conversation: Baseball has problems. The problem is with Oakland, a team not for sale and unwilling to relocate outside of the Bay Area but desperately in need of a new stadium. The problem is with Tampa Bay, a team also not for

sale, but unlike Oakland, it's frustrated enough to move. Rays owner Stu Sternberg is in an impossible place. The ballpark is no good. The region, a mass of bridges, is rush-hour-challenged. Transplants root for other teams. The fans supported the team with solid TV ratings as it improved and won the AL pennant in 2008, but the Rays have finished last in attendance per game for three years straight. Despite the agreement that the Rays must stay in St. Petersburg until 2028, baseball historically has proved there is a way out of anything.

To that end, MLB has another problem: It is out of places to go. Portland would infringe on Seattle; Charlotte would infringe on DC, Baltimore and Atlanta. Las Vegas is too small of a TV market. The Mets and Yankees oppose a third team in New York. The Red Sox oppose a second team in New England. MLB's creative idea for San Antonio and Monterrey, Mexico, to share a team died with the great recession.

Maybe it's just a leverage ploy, but Montreal, once the problem, might be a solution. The city's fans remember the sabotage beginning in 2002, believing the fix was in from the inside (directions to the stadium in French and English mysteriously went missing) and outside (the commissioner's office taking ownership of the team; the trial run of regular-season games in Puerto Rico; Selig's calling Washington a prime candidate for relocation), so they have no reason to trust baseball. Still, the city has people (1.6 million, over five times as many as Tampa), sophistication and history. Not just the Steve Rogers–Andre Dawson and Pedro Martinez–Vlad Guerrero history, but dating to 1946, when Jackie Robinson made his pro debut with the Dodgers' Montreal-based minor league team. And as painful as the Expos' exodus was, it's also worth remembering that when there was magic on the field, made by Tim Lincecum or Larry Walker, Expos fans always represented. The game's roots run deep, and if Washington can be remade as a baseball town—the game failed there twice before taking off—so too can Montreal.

Maybe Cliff Floyd taking Maddux deep 21 years ago won't be the last home run that mattered after all.

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